

Extras 441

Chapter 441 Heroic Rank Gathering [Pt 5]

"As long as they wear masks to protect themselves from inhaling the Miasma, they should be good."

Some eyes were sensitive to Miasma, so it was better for the mask to cover their faces completely. That way, they could protect most of the openings that allowed stuff into the body.

"Wearing basic Adventurer wear should also protect the body, though Miasma is only dangerous to a person's health if it is taken into the system, where the Mana network really is."

It had such a simple prevention method, yet Miasma Poisoning was one of the most difficult things to treat. Of course, depending on the severity of the poisoning, the difficulty could go down a few notches.

The reason for it being so complex was due to the Mana Network being corrupted.

In a simple case of Miasma Poisoning, simply ingesting a potent Mana Potion to boost your Mana by introducing new and fresh energy to the body would cure it. However, depending on how far the corruption went, it would only serve to make the matter worse, as the Miasma would simply corrupt the foreign Mana, compounding the issue even more.

Eventually, the entire body would be corrupted, and since the human body wasn't built to handle Miasma, such a person was bound to die.

Even those with Miasma-related Skills experienced side-effects from using them due to the weakness of the body itself.

Perhaps, in the future, the human body would adapt to Miasma, but since the stuff was so rare, that didn't seem like a prospect that would happen anytime soon.

"I'll make a few recommendations to the audience, so the Guild should have done its due diligence in that regard. Is that fine?"

Jet nodded upon hearing the words of the Guildmaster, and so the discussion continued.

"For this Conquest, I want the Heroic Rank Adventurers to form a separate Party from the rest." Richard said, his tone as serious as possible.

As one would expect, the audience was a bit surprised to hear this.

"We're going to lead the front lines, hence taking on the first blows and facing the biggest risks."

Thinking about things objectively, this would drastically reduce the mortality rate of the other participating Adventurers.

If the Heroic Rank Adventurers were to lead the charge, that would take a lot of heat off the rest.

"Will the others accept this, though? I mean, it might look like we're hogging all the good stuff to ourselves." Sherlock asked, his tone as casual as his expression.

"It doesn't matter what they think. Even if they try to whine about it, the truth is that they would do the same if given the opportunity." Britta responded with a cold tone.

"Britta is right. Besides, considering the risk we're taking by taking the front, it would be foolish for them to try to raise such criticisms."

"Okay. Fair enough." Sherlock said with a mild shrug.

"So, what do you say? Is that an agreement? All of us forming a separate party."

For a moment, there was silence. Jet glanced at Lux, and the two nodded at each other. The others also took a moment to consider it.

Then—

"I don't mind. Sounds fun." Sherlock grinned with excitement.

"I would also like that very much." Sebas added with a smile. "It would be a great privilege fighting alongside you all."

His words of reverence felt a bit misplaced and overly formal, given the mood, but since he was a newbie, everyone understood where he was coming from.

"It's not a big deal. No one should steal my kill, though." Britta said with a slight frown on her face.

She especially glared at Noah, most likely due to an incident that she just happened to remember at the moment.

"We agree to that." Jet spoke on behalf of him and Lux, and the latter's nod was proof of her agreement.

With all five of them in agreement, Richard nodded and smiled with satisfaction.

"That's good. Now, I'll explain the formation in more details to you..."

[Moments Later]

The meeting finally ended, and it was finally time for the ceremony.

All the Heroic Rank Adventurers ascended the stairs until they reached the very rooftop of the Guild Building.

It had a barricade surrounding the flat surface, and from the top of this massive structure, one could see pretty much every facet of the city.

That is, if they stayed at the edge.

If all the denizens had superhuman vision, they could also all witness what was happening at the edge of the building's peak.

"Alright now..." Richard stepped on a particular tile in front of him, causing something like a thin pillar to rise from beneath the ground.

It resembled an Enchanted Item, because it was one.

"It's imbued with Sound Magic, so it should amplify our voices. Also, it has Image Capturing Magic, so it'll project our image to the sky."

While Richard was explaining, the Item warbled and began to scan the area. It needed about a minute of calibration to begin its function, so everyone waited patiently for the time.

Excitement was rife in the air, especially on the part of the older Adventurers.

It was very rare to see a Heroic Rank Adventurer, though the fact that they had done this very thing just two weeks ago still felt surreal.

Sherlock had become such an integral Adventurer that it felt like he had been around for longer.

~FSHIIIIIII!~

Finally, the pillar completely came to life, beaming with such radiance that it instantly shrouded the bodies of the six Heroic Rank Adventurers present.

This was a scan to fully capture their image.

Before long, a massive projection shot up to the sky, instantly drawing the attention of everyone who was going on with whatever business they had.

No one could resist the urge to look up and see the real-time projection of the Adventurers on stage.

Then... the roaring sound came.

"THE TIME HAS COME, EVERYONE!" It came from Richard, and his excited voice reverberated across the city.

"I PRESENT TO YOU... THE NEW HEROIC RANK ADVENTURERS!"

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Chapter 442 Meeting With The Capital Delegates [Pt 1]

Needless to say, the entire presentation went splendidly.

The Adventurers cheered on for the strong ones that would stand at the charge in the march for freedom and adventure.

Some were envious.

A lot were inspired.

Few were unbothered.

However, there seemed to be a general consensus among the ones who raised their heads to gaze upon the mighty ones.

Each of them... were worthy of their respect.

They were the strongest!

[Moments Later]

Richard rested his head on the back of his chair, inhaling deeply as he sat behind his desk and contemplated the events that would occur the next day.

After the announcement of the new Heroic Rank Adventurers, he also mentioned news about the Conquest.

As expected, the reaction was wild.

'I intentionally made sure rumors spread before today, but it seems like a lot of people were still pretty hyped up about it.' He smiled to himself.

'Well, it was an official announcement, after all.'

As he remained in his office, embracing the silence that surrounded him, a knock echoed from the door at the far front.

'Hm?' He wondered as he slightly opened his eyes.

Richard didn't have any other appointment that day—not officially, that is. As a result, he was able to quickly deduce the identities of the ones who stood in front of his door.

Straightening up his posture, he cleared his throat and parted his lips.

"Come in."

The door creaked as it slowly opened, revealing nine people who slowly trailed inside. To his surprise, a white creature with long ears also hopped in with them.

Any normal person would consider it cute, but Richard instantly recognized the creature's strength.

'It's strong!' Was all he thought about as he watched the creature hop forward.

As for the nine who walked in, Richard did not recognize any of them except one. He was the first to enter, and he seemed to be the leader of the bunch.

The moment Richard saw him, he smiled.

"So you were sent from the Capital, eh? That's actually a surprise..."

The man before him was Sebas, and the eight other individuals behind him had to be the backup that the Royal Council was providing the Adventurers.

'They said they were sending their elite team, but they didn't specify a number.' He thought, narrowing his gaze on them.

Nine wasn't a particularly high number, but he could tell that each of them was capable. So capable, in fact, that he couldn't estimate their level of power.

'They're all as strong as Sebas... no, is that even an appropriate way to gauge their abilities?'

Sebas the Adventurer just barely made the cut for Heroic Rank according to what Britta told him, but just from their short meeting, he was able to tell that the man was hiding his strength.

'I thought he had reasons, but to think he was from the Capital...'

Richard didn't think there would be any others from the Capital who were as skilled as Brutus and Lucielle.

'So they were hiding these cards, huh? Interesting...' He smiled internally.

Each of them was stronger than your average Heroic Rank Adventurer, and he still didn't know the true depths of their strength. That meant they potentially had fourteen 6 Star Adventurers in the raid.

'If I count that creature, the number jumps to fifteen.' Richard nearly beamed.

It was a number that far exceeded his expectations.

'If only those stubborn fools could see this!' By fools, he meant the three Vice Guildmasters that were in the opposing faction.

'They're still clinging to their outdated ideology and swimming in animosity towards the Alliance because of the past... all while the people they reject are amassing more and more power.'

If the Adventurers City allied with the rest of the Alliance, Richard was sure they could achieve so much more.

Sadly, politics was a lot more complicated than that.

"May we have our seats?" Richard snapped out of his thoughts as he heard this question, to which he responded in the affirmative.

The Guildmaster's office was not lacking in sofas and chairs, so even nine people could get very comfortable.

The room was also considerably large, so it didn't seem too crowded.

"I really appreciate the Royal Council for responding to my request. I know things haven't been very smooth between the Adventurers City and the Alliance, but... well, thanks."

crowded.

"I really appreciate the Royal Council for responding to my Richard rose to his feet and approached the group that sat before him. Despite being the Guildmaster, he made an effort to shake every single one of them.

When he approached a certain lady in the group, he noticed how the long-eared creature was sticking close to her, and so chose to proceed with caution.

'She must be a tamer. Where on H'trae did she find such a beast?'

He did his best to conceal his shock and under an awkward smile as he made it past everyone in the group.

A few stood out to him instantly—like Sebas, the woman with the familiar, an ebony lady with well-defined muscles beneath her tight outfit, and the incredibly buff man that sat a little close to the woman with the white beast.

They seemed like the strongest, just going off physical appearance alone, but Richard was well aware that looks could be deceiving.

"We would like to officially introduce ourselves now, if you don't mind." Sebas said very cordially as the Guildmaster returned to his seat.

"Please do, please do."

It was really amazing how much Sebas' personality had shifted from the eager newbie to the more mature leader of an elite force.

'They look to be in their thirties, so I suppose they're in the prime of their lives.' Hesmiled, reminding himself of his own glorious days as well.

'But, that is all in the past.' Richard smiled wryly as he heard their introduction.

It turned out the lady with the white beast was called Sally. The buff guy's name was Byron, and the ebony woman was Tetra.

"Well, I look forward to working with you all."

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Chapter 443 Meeting With The Capital Delegates [Pt 2]

'This kinda sucks...'

The discussion between the students and the Guildmaster was simply a rehash of the details shared among the Heroic Rank Adventurers, so there wasn't really anything new for Rey to gain from the whole thing.

'I'm sure Adonis feels the same way...' After all, they were both present for the previous meeting.

However, unlike Adonis, he couldn't afford to zone out or look uninterested. These were all pretty important and epic things that the Guildmaster was talking about—enough to elucidate reactions from anyone present.

And so, to play his part... he had to react.

'Even if I plan on revealing my Ralyks persona eventually, the same doesn't apply to the Jet one.' He couldn't afford to act anything less than surprised.

It was also the major reason why he chose to participate in this meeting instead of just sending a duplicate.

'Alicia complained about my weird behavior when I swapped back early this morning. I'm guessing the duplicate isn't very good at replicating my behavior.'

At least, he could make up excuses and get away with acting unnaturally during casual moments, but in a serious event like this... he couldn't afford to slack off.

"Are you sure the Miasma Poisoning issue will be properly taken care of during the Conquest?" Alicia asked a valid question.

If she was present during the Heroic Rank Meeting, she wouldn't have needed clarification. But, her ignorance on the issue forced the Guildmaster to reiterate some things.

'Urgh! This is so frustrating...'

It sucked to listen to the same boring thing twice, especially when he could have been hanging out with Esme as a better alternative.

"How about checking their equipment before allowing them to participate in the Dungeon? That way we can ensure that only those who won't be susceptible to the Poisoning make it inside."

Once again... a brilliant question.

But, Rey felt tempted to shake his head at the sheer level of ignorance she was displaying.

'I know it's not her fault, but it's pretty obvious she doesn't really know a lot about Adventuring and Adventurers.'

He felt bad for thinking that way about Alicia, especially given his high regard for her. He would have probably been the same way if he didn't experience a lot of things as Jet—including having Noah explain a lot of the Adventuring stuff to him.

'Not to talk of my conversation with Rebal before coming here...' All of those really helped him in adjusting to life here.

'Ahh, now I feel worse.' free. com

To drown out his thoughts, he forced himself to listen to the rest of Richard's response.

"... Besides, it's impossible to fully inspect nearly ten thousand Adventurers before we begin the Conquest. I understand your concerns, but they know what they're getting into."

Alicia finally gave up and nodded, causing Rey to sigh in relief.

"In any case, from what you have told me... you plan on joining Parties in the Conquest, is that right? Have you decided on the ones to join, or do you need me to recommend some to you?"

Much to the Guildmaster's surprise, though, they refused his offer.

"We were already approached by Adventurers and we've joined Parties. Thank you for the offer, though."

"Ahh, I see..." The man chuckled as he smiled slyly. "You're very thorough, aren't you?"

He seemed impressed that they had already embedded themselves into the Adventurers City without any of his assistance in the slightest.

"I have a question, Guildmaster." Someone raised her hand, and the moment Rey heard the voice he had a bad feeling.

It was Belle—going by Fiona in her disguised form.

"Yes, Miss Fiona. What is your question?"

Rey didn't know why, but his heart began to race in dark foreboding. He sensed something deadly about to erupt, but he didn't know what it was.

This feeling was different from [Danger Sense]. It felt more intuitive... more natural.

It was—

"Do you know who Sir Ralyks is? Where can I find him? Is he around? Do you have any idea about the investigation he went on?"

As she blabbed on, several groans echoed from the audience.

Belle hadn't properly spoken since the night that they lodged into the Inn, and since then she had been acting all mooney and glum.

To think the first coherent words she would make after so long would be on the same issue! Many people were fed up, Rey most of all.

'This girl should just let it rest.' He thought to himself, feeling a surge of anger towards the main culprit behind all of this drama.

'Ater... just you wait.'

He gritted his teeth and held his breath while waiting for the Guildmaster, who cocked his head to the side, to ask the most obvious question.

"Who... is Sir Ralyks?"

Everyone and their mother already knew that Ralyks was an alias that was being used by an anonymous person. The only thing they knew about him was that he was an Adventurer, and that was because he said that.

If his identity was so easy to decipher, then the Royal Council would have done so already.

'Belle is even aware of this, so why is she asking?!'

Perhaps the girl was just that desperate to talk to Ralyks, making her too hopeful—almost to the point of being delusional

—that somehow the Dark Adventurer's identity would be revealed to her if she just asked.

Well, she was in for a rude awakening.

"W-well, I mean... he is... erm... ah... never mind."

Thankfully, this episode of Belle didn't last very long, and while the atmosphere was a little tainted by the weirdness for a while... it didn't last very long.

"A-anyway, thank you all so much for answering our call." The Guildmaster rose to his feet, a subtle sign that told everyone present that they had overstayed their welcome.

Much to Rey's relief, everyone was able to take the hint, and they all rose up to leave.

"It's fine." Adonis responded with his usual charm, his aura finally killing off the last vestige of awkwardness in the air.

"Save the thanks for after the Conquest is successful."

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Chapter 444 An Issue Of Priority

"Huu... I forgot to ask how they managed to get here in the first place."

As Richard collapsed back on his seat, he muttered words to himself while allowing the faces of everyone he just met to burn into his memory.

This way, he wouldn't be able to forget them no matter where they met in the future.

'They're all strong and capable. That man especially... Sebas....' Richard pictured the handsome man in his mind.

'He has the aura of a leader!'

More than anything, Richard desired to pick him as his successor. He could already tell that the man was more than capable of it.

'Should I talk to him about it? Try to make him a sweet offer, maybe?' He shook his head as his wry smile widened.

"Nah, that would definitely piss off the Royal Council. I shouldn't try to poach such an asset of theirs—especially when I'm trying to establish good relations with them."

Still, it was such a shame.

'Having someone like that to bridge the gap between Adventurers and the Alliance... wouldn't that be something?'

Richard decided to stop thinking about it, else he would be tempted to throw caution to the wind and ask the man anyway.

'I suppose my options have now been cut down to four potential candidates.'

Out of those four, he already singled Lux out due to her passive attitude. Britta was also very hot-headed and brash, lacking a lot of the emotional maturity that made a great leader, so she was out as well.

'I mean, there's a reason why I still didn't consider her for the position when she was the only competent around.'

That left two real choices; Jet and Sherlock.

'Sherlock is still too young, but he has a lot of potential. If I start early, I could groom him into a capable leader.'

However, considering how uncertain life was—especially the life of an Adventurer—Richard wasn't sure if he would have enough of it to properly mold the boy.

'I suppose that leaves Jet as the optimal choice...'

Sure, the man was enigmatic, but he was already well-received by most of the Adventurers. His fame and power was nothing to sneeze at.

'Plus, he has the will of Zephyr in him.' Guildmaster Richard nodded as he remembered how he heard the loud declaration of the lad's dreams.

'I suppose the final decision will be made after the Conquest.' He smiled widely and felt himself drift into unconsciousness.

[Meanwhile]

"You're back, huh? That was quick..."

As Rey opened his eyes, he found himself staring at Esme's face.

It was so close to his—about only an inch or two apart. The moment he finally processed what was happening, he became so startled that he nearly jumped out of the room that his current body occupied.

"The hell?! What did you do that for?" Rey yelled, already creating some distance between himself and the girl who simply stared at him.

"H-how long have y-you been standing there for?!"

His face was very hot, and the dark mask covering it didn't help in the slightest. He also found himself stuttering, which further showed how flustered he was.

"Not too long ago." Esme shrugged, almost as if the whole thing wasn't that big a deal. "I got bored waiting and wanted to see if I could remove the mask and take a peek."

She sighed and walked towards her bed, collapsing on it in one swift downward motion.

"Y-you what? And you're admitting it just like that?"

"Why would I lie about something like that? I've been begging you to show me for some time now, yet you won't."

"S-still! Why am I even flustered? It's not like you could have succeeded!"

"Oh? You sure about that?" Esme made a smug look, rubbing her hands together. "I think I was pretty close back there. You just had to show up."

The truth was, Rey's original body never left the room. Instead, he simply shared his senses with his duplicate through their connection.

Unfortunately, anytime he did this, his main body couldn't really do anything. He only had one mind, after all.

"I'm have tons of passive protection, so you wouldn't have been able to pry open the mask no matter how hard you tried!" Rey said, folding his hands.

Despite saying that, a creeping fear popped into his mind. 'What if she found a way around that?'

"I think I could have found a way around that." As if reading his mind, Esme replied with a smirk.

Her unfounded confidence was driving him crazy.

"Well, joke's on you. You're not even sure it's my real face that's under the mask right no—"

"It is."

Esme's swift response had an aura of seriousness about it despite her smile. She seemed to have a sense of certainty.

It scared Rey.

"Pfft! That's... there's no way you could know for sure."

"Well, I just do. I have no doubt that the face speaking to me from behind the mask is your true one."

Rey felt his heart nearly jump out of his chest.

'S-she's not wrong. But... how can she be so sure?' He couldn't comprehend it.

"What makes you say that?"

For a moment, Esme said nothing. She placed a finger on her chin and looked at the ceiling for a moment, thinking about the question as if the answer was far away.

Then, forming a wider smile than before, she gave a big shrug and threw her arms up in the air.

"I don't know, Rey." She let out a slight giggle as she did so.

Rey thought it was quite cute—no, a lot more than that. (f)ree

"I just feel like you could use whatever face you want to talk to me, without the mask on, yet for some reason... you always use it when we're alone."

Rey swallowed hard as he continued to hear her words.

His heart seriously raced because he knew she was arriving at the truth.

"Maybe I'm wrong, but I believe it's because you prefer being around me with your real face."

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Chapter 445 A Little Bit Of Venting

Esme wasn't wrong in the slightest.

Rey already realized it, but he really felt like he could be himself around her.

The first time he transformed to his true self, only with the mask on, in front of her, it was such a subconscious action that he didn't even realize it until she asked if it was really him underneath the mask.

He had just gotten so comfortable around her.

'Well, I guess she can see right through me...' His smile was hidden under the dark mask, unseen by the girl in front of him.

Before the silence continued for too long, Esme raised up another topic that completely shifted the mood of the conversation.

"Why did you get back so early, though? The meeting didn't take very long, I'm guessing."

As she asked this question, Rey instantly remembered the entire thing that happened in the Guildmaster's office—including how frustrated he felt back then.

"It didn't take long? Are you kidding? It took too long!" His back fell on the bed as he whined, not seeing the smile that Esme gave him as she rested her head on one hand.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah! The worst part was that I had to act engaged or things would seem off." He added, sighing to himself.

Whenever he was with Esme, this pathetic side of himself just managed to ooze out and he felt like he could vent all he wanted.

Though, sometimes, Rey wondered if he wasn't being excessive.

"Well, if it took so long why are you back so soon?" As soon as he heard that question, Rey thought back to when he stopped the sensory sharing experience the moment they left the Adventurers Guild.

From that point on, his duplicate's body was on autopilot.

'Alicia is definitely going to chew me out later!' He thought to himself, nearly clenching his teeth in obvious guilt.

In Rey's defense, though, he had serious matters to discuss with Esme regarding their plans going forward, unlike the more casual conversation he would have had with Alicia.

In essence, he was choosing business over pleasure—a truly disciplined move.

Yes... that was his true reason!

"In any case, we should get to the serious stuff, Esme." Rey said, returning to an upright sitting posture.

"Alright, alright."

The mood in the room turned a little tense as both parties looked at each other with tension in their eyes.

"About the Guildmaster's plan to—"

"Pfft..."

"Hm? What's so funny?" Rey asked, wondering why Esme just burst out laughing.

"Nothing, sorry. I'm so sorry, carry on."

At this point, Rey's curiosity got the better of him. He just had to know what caused her to laugh like that—especially when they were having such a serious moment.

"Just say it."

"No, it's really nothing."

"Just... come on, don't be like this. Say what made you laugh."

"I told you, it's really nothing."

"If it's nothing, then say it!"

"No! Don't worry about it. Let's continue the talk."

"Esme!"

"About the Grandmaster's plan to... go on."

"It's Guildmaster! Also, just spit it out."

"Yeah, yeah..."

"Come on!"

"We're running out of time, you know?"

"...."

After more back and forths, the room finally quieted down. Despite not using any Skills or even moving from their positions, the two had just engaged in a fierce battle.

The winner was, of course, Esme.

'She didn't tell me till the very end. Damn...' Rey gritted his teeth as he swallowed his wounded pride to continue his earlier statement.

It would be a lie if he said he wasn't still curious about the source of her laughter, but he decided to ignore the nagging feeling for more important stuff.

Business over pleasure, after all...

"Anyway... about the Guildmaster's plan to have us together with the other Heroic Rank Adventurers, it'll affect our initial plans a little."

Their original plan was to function as a Party of two and grind in the Dungeon, as independently as they could.

If possible, they would cut off from the rest of the group just for the freedom to kill as many Monsters and raise Esme's Stats.

"This new plan will have to restrict us, as well as the EXP gained from the entire expedition." Rey sighed.

He really wanted to refuse the Guildmaster's plan, but there was really no good reason he could give to justify it.

'It's a solid strategy, and it will yield the overall best results for the collective.'

Rey had operate under the confines of the persona he had generated, so he couldn't give any response contrary to the ideals he represented as 'Jet.' fre(e)

'The fact that everyone agreed with the plan shows just how effective it is.'

If he and Lux became the sole contrarians, it would go against everything he had been building up from Day 1.

'And I can't have that, now can I?' He sighed.

"I don't think it's a really bad arrangement." Esme's voice woke him up from his internal analysis.

"Besides, if the whole thing becomes a bother, we can always find a way to separate ourselves from the rest, right?"

As expected, she looked at the bright side of things.

"Well, yeah... you're not wrong." Rey commented, his face still depicting contemplation. "If the current arrangement is detrimental to your growth and my plans, we'll stop going along with it."

He could think of a bunch of things he could do to achieve that end.

"If things go well, it could even end up contributing to your epic grand plan." Esme said with a slight chuckle.

"You really think so?"

It seemed Rey missed the sarcasm there, but it wasn't of primary concern.

"Well, we can only wait and see."

"I suppose you're right..." After Rey said this, the two were silent for a while.

Then—

"Anyway, I was wondering..." Esme began, though in a slightly low tone. "... If we could go on some kind of tour through the ci
—"

"Ah... I gotta go now! We just got back to our rooms and Adonis wants to have a secret discussion with us."

Before Esme could finish, Rey already zoned out, leaving his body in a completely frozen state.

The Half Elf girl stared at it for a while before shaking her head and sighing.

"Never mind..."

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Chapter 446 The Most Unexpected Offer

Adonis' discussion with his classmates was pretty brief.

This was because they all had to meet up with their Party Members immediately after, and they probably weren't going to see each other until the day of the Conquest.

Even then, with an expected turnout of almost ten thousand members, it was possible that they wouldn't even see each other until much later.

He understood all of this, so while he tried to be as concise as possible, he also did his best to carefully observe the emotions of everyone present.

Thankfully, everyone seemed to be present in the room—physically and mentally.

So far, they had reiterated the strategies they would employ, and afterwards Adonis allowed each student to talk about the Parties they ended up with.

Some seemed fun, others seemed a bit iffy. It didn't matter how strong or weak the members were, though.

Their personalities were also not really important.

The goal was to train everyone on how to properly handle being in a team filled the strangers.

People were different, so it was perhaps even better for those who had more diverse members in their Parties.

'Even weak Parties will serve a good purpose and will depict a proper account of what the battlefield is really like.'

Adonis truly felt like everyone was on the path of growth for this Conquest.

'The event will probably last a couple of days, even if we hurry. After all, we have no idea how the interior works.'

Worst case scenario, they could be in there for a week.

'The goal is to stick together and leave once the time limit has been reached—whether or not the Boss is defeated or not.'

No one knew what happened to those who remained within a Dungeon once it vanished, and they certainly weren't willing to find out.

At the very least, Adonis wasn't.

"Thank you all for your time, everyone." He smiled at the audience in front of him, nodding with pride and personal resolve.

"Let's all do our best!"

'Haaa... it's finally over!' Rey smiled to himself.

He had left a pretty engaging conversation with Esme to arrive on time. Thankfully, he didn't miss anything important.

'I think Esme was saying something before I had to connect here.' It could have been his imagination, but he had to make sure just in case.

He didn't want to be rude, after all.

'I think I'll head back now and find out for su—'

Before he could finish, though, a hand waved in front of him. It instantly broke him out of his thoughts.

"Rey, you there?" Alicia's familiar and warm voice echoed in his ears, causing him to look in her direction, almost in surprise.

"Yeah! Why would you even ask that?"

He made a slight laugh, and she shrugged slightly. "I don't know. I guess you just seem absent lately. Are you fine?"

He felt a little guilty once he heard those words.

The truth was that he indeed was absent—literally. His clone was the one who was present, so she wasn't particularly wrong.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He responded, hiding his nervous smile. "I'm probably just thinking a lot about this city and different it is from what we're used to."

"Yeah! I know, right?"

Alicia's bright smile warmed his heart so much. He had almost forgotten how fun it was to just sit beside the girl and converse with her.

The suppressed guilt he hid away began to eat at him even more.

"What about you, Alicia? Are you fine?"

Alicia's face clouded a little upon hearing the question.

Thankfully, it didn't last for too long.

"I'll be fine. The meeting with my Party Members isn't for another hour or so. What of yours?"

Rey felt like there was a lot that Alicia was glossing over, and he intended on getting to the root of it, but first... he decided to answer her question.

"Same here."

"Really? That's perfect then!" She bounced to her feet, beaming with some unknown energy whose origin remained a mystery to him.

"Since we won't be doing anything until then, why don't we explore the city together?"

"... Eh?"

The surprise on Rey's face was indescribable.

He never saw it coming—Alicia's offer, that is. The truth was, he had been so busy with his plans and double lives that he hadn't really thought about leisurely activities.

'I already scouted the whole city in my free time in my search for Adrien too, so I am pretty familiar with everything here.'

There was no real reason for him to desire going through another tour again. Just like the meeting earlier, wouldn't it be another boring repeat of an experience he already had?

Well... Rey's heart didn't seem to be thinking that at all.

His cheeks would have flushed in embarrassment if this was his body, but thankfully his sensory connection only went so far.

"What do you think? You said it yourself, didn't you? It's a lot different from what we're used to." Alicia's smile widened. "Wanna check it out?"

Rey didn't even believe she had to ask him that question.

"T-that sounds like a wonderful idea!" He jumped to his feet before even realizing it.

'I'm such an idiot...' His thoughts trailed as he looked at the face of the girl he loved with his heart. —The one who saved him from crippling loneliness.

'I've not been paying her enough attention. '

Rey's smile deepened as he arced his arms, inviting her to grab a hold of them. He saw it in a show once, and he felt it was a pretty gentlemanly gesture, and to be honest, he just did it for jokes.

Much to his surprise, Alicia grabbed a hold of his arm and drew her body close to him.

'Ahh...' Rey instantly felt a wave of her nice scent occupy his senses as her hair brushed upon his skin.

It felt good.

"Alright then, Sir Rey..."

Alicia's giggles filled the room as she blushed slightly.

"Please lead the way."

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Chapter 447 Night Before The Conquest [Pt 1]

The plan was to spend an hour exploring.

But, due to their long conversation, the incredible amount of fun they were having, and just the reluctance to leave each other... the two ended up spending nearly four hours together.

It was already getting dark at this point, as the evening had aged into night.

Rey walked side by side with Alicia, as they found themselves under the night sky, enjoying the cool ambiance of the world around them.

None of them said anything. They were just soaked in the world around them as they felt the warmth of their hands.

Yes, they were holding hands.

Even Rey didn't know when this started, but they just happened to do so. So far, their activities had included a lot of sightseeing and eating tons of local delicacies.

They didn't taste as good as the Royal Estate meals, but just as Rey noted during his time with Noah, the food in the city had a certain flavor that made it stand out to the senses.

Nonetheless, they had tons of fun.

'Is this a date?' At some point Rey had to ask himself.

He looked at Alicia and observed her smile. She seemed happy—very happy—with him. Didn't that mean that she liked him?

'But what if it's just as a friend and I'm overthinking it?'

If that was the case, then he would ruin their friendship by confessing to her. That had been what was holding him back for so long.

Well, that and his secret as Ralyks.

'I can't keep running from my feelings. I'll confront them once I reveal myself as Ralyks and tell her the truth!'

He was still scared about what her reaction was going to be. However, since he really believed that he had to be honest with the person he really loved... he just had to take the leap and hope for the best.

'I'll tell her about it in private first. Then, I'll reveal it to everyone else...' It would be when Lucielle and Brutus arrived, so he wouldn't have to explain himself again.

Even now, he got goosebumps about the whole thing.

"Hey, Rey..." Alicia's voice broke him out of his thoughts, and he looked at her with his most attentive face ever.

"Yes?"

"I... well, this was a lot of fun." She muttered, her eyes glistening as she turned to look at him. "I had a lot of fun."

"Me too..."

Somehow, Rey felt like there was a lot more that Alicia wanted to say. He desired to ask, but something told him to hold off and be patient.

And so, he was.

He waited to see what she would tell him, his eyes beaming as it reflected hers.

"To be honest, I was a little worried before. About you, and about... us." Something about how Alicia said he 'us' made Rey's heart nearly skip a beat.

Still, he creased his brows the moment he heard such a dark revelation.

"Worried? Why?"

"Well, is that even a question? You've been acting pretty distant lately. It's like one moment you're here and the next moment you're not."

It was really at that moment that Rey realized just how much of an effect his absence had affected his relationship with Alicia.

"I know this makes me sound needy and stuff. I hate how gross that makes me, which is why I didn't want to say anything for the longest time..." She sighed, shrugging and throwing her hands up.

"I didn't want to say anything before, but then after tonight, this time with you, there's just such a difference that I wonder why you were acting that way before."

Alicia went on to talk about the instances when he acted weird, and when Rey heard some of those things, he wanted to kill himself.

He literally wished the ground would swallow him that very moment.

'I did all of those things? The heck?!' He already knew his duplicate was a poor imitation of him, personality-wise, but this was just next-level bad.

"I know it sounds a bit cringe, but I want us to have more moments like this, you know? Ahh, I hope I'm not ranting too much or anything. I just..."

Alicia paused a little before looking away—at the ground—and then back at Rey.

"... I missed you."

Once Rey heard that, he felt something in his heart tell him two things.

One was that he was such an insensitive idiot for not paying enough attention to Alicia. They were close friends, yet he just left her with a clone of him to deal with business.

That was just next-level despicable.

However, apart from the self-loathing, there was something else that oozed within him. It was impossible to ignore the chemistry in the air that night, and Rey felt like the mood was just perfect.

It was a quiet night, and they now sat at a secluded corner, just the two of them, under the darkness of the sky.

'Should I... go for it?' He saw her moist lips and gulped instantly.

They seemed to call him nearer, and he just couldn't refuse the instinctive act of man.

'What am I doing? I'm going to make her mad! She's going to hate me! She's going to slap me and walk away!'

All those thoughts played over in his mind as he drew closer.

Much to his surprise, though, Alicia also seemed to be drawing closer.

It wasn't just his imagination! Her body arched close to his, and her lips also seemed ready for his own.

'Is this it? Does this mean...?!'

Rey threw aside all his hesitation and decided to risk it all in this gamble. His heart felt like it would explode at any moment, but he endured and pulled closer.

He didn't even care that this wasn't his real body.

Rey just wanted her.

Then, before he realized it, the distance between both of their faces was near non-existent.

Any moment now, and—

"Oh? Is that you, Rey?" A loud voice echoed from behind the two of them, instantly halting their motion.

"Alicia too? What are the both of you doing alone here? Without your disguises too."

Both of them already recognized the voice, and as the person drew closer, the mood was instantly ruined.

Rey couldn't help but grit his teeth and sigh.

'Justin... you idiot!'

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Chapter 448 Night Before The Conquest [Pt 2]

The night was awkward after that.

They had to speak to Justin, who was just returning from his meeting with his Party Members when he saw them in that corner.

As expected, he poked jokes at them and tried to probe further into what they were doing alone in the dark, but none of them answered honestly.

Thankfully, Justin only caught about a second of it, so he couldn't make any concrete case.

"Well, I hope your Party meeting went well. I'm supposed to rendezvous with them at our Group Room later, so I'm just whiling the time away exploring the city." He explained with a casual smile.

It might have been casual information from his perspective, but both Rey and Alicia received a rude awakening the moment he said this.

'THE PARTY MEETING!'

They had completely lost track of time, and now the meeting was probably over.

Justin, being the perceptive guy that he was, observed their shocked expressions and cocked his head slightly.

"You guys okay?"

"Y-yeahh..." They both muttered, their heads hanging in disgrace.

Who would have thought that Alicia—the stern and disciplined one—and the Extra—who didn't cause trouble for anyone—would be the ones to default in the plan?

Their heads were still spinning as to the consequences of their actions when Justin waved them goodbye.

"Welp! I gotta go now! You people can continue what you were doing back the—ouch!"

A slight jab from Alicia sent him hopping away, hurriedly waving as he ran off in both pain and fright.

"See you guys at the Conquest!"

As both Rey and Alicia heard his last words, they sighed simultaneously. Rey's sigh was louder, though.

'There's no way we can continue now...'

Not only was the mood not right, but they had to deal with their lateness to their respective Party Meetings.

Rey didn't know about Alicia, but he would be lying if he said he wasn't aware that time was passing and that he was supposed to be in his Party Meeting.

However, because of his time with her, he kept pushing it aside. He couldn't even use his Skill to create another duplicate to take his place, since that meant he would be momentarily disconnected from his current clone.

He didn't want to do that with Alicia—especially in the later parts of their evening together.

In the end, he messed up.

"W-well... I guess we better get going to our Party Meeting..." She muttered, causing Rey to slightly nod.

"Mine is in that direction."

"Mine is over there."

Both of them pointed to separate places, which clearly meant they would have to part ways at that particular spot.

The wise thing to do was to dash off, not wasting any time at all, but something about the atmosphere caused their feet to be planted in the ground.

"So... I guess we won't see each other till the Conquest. Maybe even until after."

"Yeah. We won't be able to talk until after."

They both stared away from each other in silence, feeling the awkwardness creep in on their skin.

Perhaps it was just reluctance, but it seemed like neither of them wanted to be the one to say goodbye.

'Damn... how do I...?' Rey swallowed his saliva and clenched his fist.

It wasn't right that they were still delaying despite how precarious their situation was. Before he could be the bigger person and tell Alicia goodnight, though...

"I should go now. Bye Rey!"

... She ran off, almost as fast as the gust of wind.

"B-bye..." He slightly raised his hand while mumbling.

Rey remained like that for a while, soaking in the disappointment that now filled his body at a massive rate.

'I was so close...' He closed his eyes, clenching his fist while his upper and lower teeth grated against each other.

'What will happen now? Will we forget this moment? Will we try it again?'

Rey wasn't sure.

There was one thing he couldn't deny now, though, and that brought him incredible relief.

'Alicia... I'm pretty sure she likes me!'

It made him so happy that he could scream at the top of his lungs in victory.

And that was exactly what he did.

"WOOOHOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"

Sound Magic blocked anyone else from hearing his thunderous shout of triumph, so he didn't really care how loud he was.

Rey just felt so happy!

'I'll definitely confess to her when we get back.'

He would have preferred doing it after the Conquest, but that time wouldn't be appropriate considering how many moving pieces there would be after everything was over.

'We'll be pretty busy. Plus, the most vital reason is the casualties...'

People were going to die in this Conquest, and he wasn't going to save them. No, it was more like he couldn't.

They chose the path that they desired, so it wasn't like it was his fault at all.

'If I want to cause no casualties, I could just try clearing it myself. Well, maybe with Esme by my side.'

But would that really be the best solution? Was that what the Adventurers wanted, or even needed.

The answer was no.

'A lot of them are going to die, but they wouldn't have it any other way.'

Rey wasn't saying that Adventurers were suicidal who simply desired to die. No, they were simply risk-takers who chose—for various reasons—to walk down a path that could lead to their demise.

'We all die someday. It's just a matter of how and when...'

He couldn't allow himself to be overly concerned with the mortality of the Adventurers in this Conquest, especially since more were going to die after he was gone from the city.

'Let's just stick to the plan...' Rey began walking away. '... And everything should be fine.'

A few more steps forward and he stopped dead in his tracks before swiftly realizing something.

... Something he hadn't thought of before.

Swiftly cupping his two hands around his mouth and nose, he heavily poured out his breath and smelled it.

'No bad breath? Whew...!'

After sighing in relief, he continued down his path.

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Chapter 449 Day Of The Conquest [Pt 1]

[Day of The Dungeon Conquest]

[Location: West of the City, Entrance Of The Grand Calamity Class Dungeon]

"YEAHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The evening was bursting with life as every Adventurer in the area roared with incredible vigor.

Thousands upon thousands of Adventurers could be seen, all in their respective gear, as they roared with both exhilaration and determination.

The time had finally come—the climax that had been building up for the past few days.

Everyone's face, the ones that weren't hidden underneath helmets, masks, or hoods, depicted excitement.

Many had greedy looks in their eyes. Some appeared scared, while others just slightly unnerved.

Some Adventurers knew they were not qualified to enter the Dungeon, but held onto the hope that as long as the top-class Adventurers were present, they could just leech off them and enjoy whatever leftovers they could get.

They were especially glad to see that the Heroic Rank Adventurers were standing right in front of everyone—leading the march to collective prosperity.

The Scavengers were also present, though they preferred to stay at the rear.

Their approach was to wait and see just what kind of reward they could benefit once everyone had gotten their fill or became complacent.

It astronomically reduced the risk on their end, and as long as they held out for long enough, they could gain a lot of spoils—all without hardly lifting a finger.

Just as Guildmaster Richard estimated, the number of Adventurers in the vast western desert was almost ten thousand.

A total 9,870 Adventurers were present for the Conquest—nearly twice the number that showed up during the last one of such a kind that took place three hundred years ago.

Not only did they have more members, but the number of Heroic Rank Adventurers was also astronomically higher.

All in all, they had surpassed their ancestors.

It was their duty to see this through to the very end and make them proud.

"Looks like some people didn't listen and get their face masks..." Sherlock said with a sigh.

He stood among the rest of his peers, the Heroic Rank Adventurers. It felt a bit odd, seeing as he was the shortest among them, but he chose to ignore the fact and hoped everyone also did the same.

Thankfully, no one brought it up.

"They must be confident of their tolerance level. I mean, look at us." Richard smiled at Sherlock.

"We're also not wearing any."

"That's because we're stronger, obviously." Britta sighed.

The quality of their Mana was a lot greater than Miasma that would be drifting in the air, so there was really no chance for them to be poisoned with such a method.

Besides, even though none of them went out and said it, all the Heroic Rank Adventurers had masks among the load they carried. Not only that, but they had Mana Potions of all kinds so they could treat Miasma Poisoning if it ever happened to them.

Of course, given the limited amount they carried, it was doubtful that they would share their goods with careless Adventurers.

"I suppose this is a good opportunity for peddlers to make some money." Sherlock shrugged. "I even saw a bunch of them on my way here."

It wasn't strange for peddlers to enter Dungeons, especially if it was a large scale operation like a Raid or Conquest.

That way, they could sell their goods at absurdly high rates. Depending on the difficulty of the Dungeon, and the desperation of the Adventurers inside, their rates could go from three times more than the usual market price to up to ten times.

The Adventurers involved would have no choice but to buy those items—whether it be Potions or Enchanted Items—due to their precarious situation.

That alone made it a profitable venture; enough for peddlers to risk their lives by entering dangerous Dungeons... just to make a lot of money.

"Well, there's no need to focus on those behind us. It should be the opposite, don't you agree, Jet?"

As the Guildmaster's words echoed amongst the strong, everyone cast their gaze on the man in his dark coat and gentlemanly hat.

Even now, he held his briefcase like a traveling businessman, and he gave off an air of formality.

More importantly, he had remained quiet for most of the conversation.

Until now.

"I wouldn't say I agree, but... I do know one thing." Jet glanced left and right, ensuring his eyes met every single one of his comrades.

Then, he stared ahead, at the massive entrance of the Dungeon.

"A Dungeon does not discriminate between the strong or weak. If we don't focus on the task at hand, we could be the ones to die."

His words had a grim tone attached to them as he spoke the grim truth.

There were cases of strong Adventurers dying in Dungeons, just as there were circumstances where weaklings were slaughtered.

Most Adventurers, strong or weak, perished this way.

As a result, the hubris of the strong was something that had to be cut off as soon as one possibly could.

Within a Dungeon, there were unknown creatures that lurked in the dark.

Human understanding could not comprehend them, just as they could not understand the nature of their home.

Till today, Dungeons largely remained a mystery.

"I have a question for you all." As tension rose in the air, and the moment of reckoning drew near, Jet's calm voice once again echoed out.

"What do you think is the most primal aspect of man? Our most base nature?"

The faces of many displayed surprise. Still, some attempted to answer, giving a unanimous answer that most would agree with.

"Fea—"

"Many will call it fear, but I disagree." Jet added, his voice somber and dark.

"Man's most primal nature is ignorance; a blank slate that knows nothing about the world or how it works."

Even babies had this integral, base nature of man.

"But, how then do we get to fear?"

The answer was simple. It existed in the process in-between

"Ignorance breeds curiosity... the desire to know more about the world... to understand how it works."

But it didn't stop there.

"Curiosity breeds knowledge. And that knowledge..." Jet cast his gaze on the Dungeon with intense eyes.

"... It leads to fear."

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Chapter 450 Day Of The Conquest [Pt 2]

Fear of the UNKNOWN.

It is a popular term coined by those who lived in the world.

But how true is it, really? Do humans really fear the unknown?

What of children—babies, even?

They know nothing, yet fear is such a distant emotion for them.

For most, fear is taught... alongside pain, in a way to determine the difference between right and wrong.

... Good and evil.

The fear of the unknown does not exist.

Ignorance never breeds fear—at least not directly. Instead, it is the catalyst for a process that eventually leads to fear.

When we come into the world, we know nothing.

We fear nothing.

But, we grow curious. Then, we learn. We receive the taint of knowledge, which then brings us to a particular point.

The point where we know that there are things that we do not know—blots in existence that hide forbidden truths from us.

This is what breeds fear.

And so, as they stood before overwhelming gates that lead to a place none of them understood, the Adventurers weren't scared because of their ignorance.

No, they were frightened because they had knowledge.

They knew what had happened to their predecessors who took on this impossible task. They knew how fatal Miasma was. They knew what it meant to feel pain... to suffer... to watch others die, and to nearly die themselves.

That was what caused the fear to sprout.

They were not innocent lambs being led to the slaughter, neither were they babies who embodied ignorance.

If they were, none of them would flinch at the slightest sign of such terror.

But, these men and women who braved themselves for the darkness to come were aged.

And so... they couldn't escape the fear.

~CREEEAAK!~

The loud noise caused by the massive gates opening caused everyone's excited faces to turn grim.

No one smiled any longer—not one.

The repulsive energy the leaked out from within the place caused many to shiver. Still, they braced themselves.

They didn't come this far for nothing.

The massive entrance was almost fifty meters in height alone, and it was so wide that a hundred people could walk in, side by side, without any discomfort.

The overwhelming Dungeon itself was already a massive fortress, so it made sense for its entrance to be so eerie.

Then—

"We will now begin the first Grand Calamity Class Dungeon Conquest since three hundred years ago!" Guildmaster Richard's voice filled the air.

Everyone tightened their hold on their weapons and readied their trembling legs.

It was too late for those having second thoughts to turn back now.

The crowd of ten thousand was about to march forward at the signal of the Guildmaster. It would be an unstoppable stampede.

"CHARGE FORTH!"

As the voice sprang forth, a thunderous yell from the crowd dominated the space and everyone rushed forward in a straight march.

For glory... for power... for wealth... for freedom.

It didn't matter what their motivations and inclinations were at that moment.

All that mattered was the Dungeon in front of them, and the sole life they had to live.

'The Miasma is bearable...'

Rey thought this as he and his team stepped into the massive hall of the Dungeon's ground floor.

It was too large that massive felt like an understatement in describing it.

Purple flames burned eternally atop vials that hung on the walls, so it wasn't entirely dark. Yet, the looming shadows around could not be completely vanished.

It created an air of unease as Rey carefully observed his surroundings.

The distance between the ground and ceiling was about a hundred meters, and the entire space around felt overwhelmingly big—even for the size of fortress around them.

'I suppose this is the same weird phenomenon that goes on in energy-dense areas.' Just as with the 99th Floor of the Royal Dungeon, where the concept of time was distorted, it seemed this one affected the space around.

Or perhaps this was simply the influence of some kind of Magic or Skill.

Rey couldn't tell.

In their hundreds, the Adventurers trailed in, having more than enough to occupy the room, and their numbers didn't even exceed the first half of the room's total space.

The tiled floors seemed to be made from some sort of black stone, and the ancient walls seemed to consist of large bricks that seemed aged.

It looked like an abandoned castle of sorts, with an unbelievably large flight of stairs standing an impossible distance from them.

A non-functional chandelier even lay suspended on the ceiling.

'This structure looks different from most Dungeons I've studied about. I know it's a Grand Calamity Class, but still...'

Unlike most Dungeons that seemed to form naturally—perhaps through caves and caverns—this one seemed a little odd.

It looked like a house—or more specifically, a mansion.

There didn't seem to be any concept like 'Floors' in this place, and even though Rey was spreading his senses around to confirm this, he felt nothing.

'The Miasma is interfering with my senses, but I can still perceive things.'

Regular Dungeons had Floors, and the ground floor was usually considered the easiest. Depending on the kind of Dungeon, the lower or higher you went meant the difficulty increased.

'But this... what exactly is this?'

A Dungeon with no Floors, having a structure like a castle meant one thing.

'There are several rooms here, with upper and mid regions. I'm guessing each room is like a Floor, but since they're so random, it's sort of impossible to tell which is more dangerous than which.'

To put that into perspective, they could end up skipping a Floor 2 and enter a Floor 9. If that happened, it would be too overwhelming and a slaughter was bound to happen.

'Someone definitely built this Dungeon. Maybe there's some sort of clue—?'

~BAM!~

The loud noise of the gates shutting tight echoed in the air, causing many to leak out gasps while staring behind them.

At that very moment, bright purple light rose from the other side of the room, revealing a hidden darkness that occupied the depths of the ground.

Before they realized it... something was beginning to emerge.

—Something evil.