

Extras 591

Chapter 591 The Gala Incident [Pt 5]

Felicia felt slightly displeased at the moment.

As she stared at Rey, whose entire demeanor was nothing like what she remembered—if she could even remember much, to begin with.

He was an overall average individual, with no particularly striking quality. The only burst of fame—or rather, infamy—that he had was when he revealed his lousy Skill and Class, which garnered the mockery of everyone in class.

In retrospect, Felicia could see that he had somehow lied, but back then everyone wrote him off.

'Yet he managed to become the most powerful of them, and he's even changed his physical appearance...' She eyed him unconsciously.

Not only was Rey much taller than before, but he actually looked a lot more handsome than she remembered.

Perhaps it was due to his eyepatch, or the dark strands of hair that cascaded down his face, creating a mask of mystery. Perhaps his nice build, coupled with all the aforementioned factors, played a role in it.

She could no longer call him average in that sense any longer.

'Looks like Cayden was right. Everything about him is so different now.'

While she approached him to witness the change with her very eyes, also expecting the possibility that she would be caught by him, Felicia hadn't realized it would be this much.

Narrowing her eyes, she decided to set those thoughts aside and answer Rey's question.

"Just wanted to see you. I heard you stepped up in the social ladder and you're all buddy buddy with the Royal Council. I guess I wanted to see for myself."

"And? Now that you've seen me, is that all?"

The way Rey rolled his eyes and stared at her, as if completely bored, made Felicia even more infuriated.

'If we were back on Earth, he wouldn't even dare look at my face!'

Of course, she recognized that wasn't the case. She also knew that Rey was most definitely stronger than she was—so it was unwise to cause unnecessary conflict.

Starting a fight she couldn't win would be foolish of her.

'But... there is more than one way to ensnare a man.' With a wide grin on her face, she began to walk salaciously and drew closer to Rey.

"Well... you tell me..." In no time at all, she was just an inch away from his stiff body.

"Why don't we go upstairs for a dance?"

Rey's cold gaze still reflected non/compliance. The way he stared at her, almost like she was nothing, drove her to the edge of rage.

But Felicia didn't give into it.

After all, it was about time for her to use her Skill.

'It's a gamble, but if I succeed, I'll be able to have the strongest piece of the Alliance under my control.'

Right now, more than half of the Nobles present in the Capital were under her power. In a day or two, she would have the rest under her thumb.

However, even they wouldn't be enough to take over the United Human Alliance.

'Yes, they have resources and influence... but they lack that raw power.'

That was why she needed the rest of the Otherworlders—or at least, Rey—on her side.

'With his power, I can put everyone else in check. And since everyone is somewhat relying on him to stop the Dragons, no one will mess with me since I'll be the one calling the shots.'

As Felicia thought this, misty breaths escaped her lips and nostrils.

She drew them closer to Rey as she placed a hand on his shoulder.

All she needed was a kiss, and then...

'You'll be mine—!'

~BOOOOOOOM!~

Noise erupted from the hall, causing the girl to yelp in surprise.

"Ah!" She lost her grip on Rey's shoulder, and would have collapsed on his chest.

However, he sidestepped at the last minute, causing her to tumble on the ground—her lovely gown eating some dirt.

"O-ow..." As she recoiled from the pain, and the shock caused from such a loud explosion, she looked up to see Rey staring coldly at her.

'Prick! He couldn't even catch me!' Gritting her teeth, she gave him a deep glare.

Her composure was completely lost, and she was one breath away from cursing at him.

However—

"Guess we'll continue this some other time. A rather interesting matter has come up."

—Rey shifted his attention from her almost immediately and turned to the direction of the explosion.

There were people trooping out of the ball, and perhaps if it wasn't evident before, it was now clear that the Gala had been put on a hard stop thanks to whatever incident just occurred.

'What the hell just happened?' Felicia thought to herself.

Nothing about her plan involved something like this—and certainly not at a period like this.

It also didn't seem to be planned by the Royal Council; all things considered.

'C-could it be... Dragons?!

Several guards began to proceed into the hall from all sides, just as the civilians exited.

Felicia wondered what guards could do if some monstrosity showed up.

'What the hell? Why now?'

Felicia found her body trembling slightly. What was happening before her eyes was a chaotic sight, one that would normally cause anxiety.

However, once she stole one look at Rey—expecting some sort of reaction or explanation from him—she was met with the most surprising thing.

'He's calm?!'

Her bulging eyes fully analyzed Rey, watching as he kept one hand in his pocket and the other on his glass cup.

"Hmm..." A near silent voice echoed from his slightly parted lips.

His eye narrowed slightly, and some sort of glow seemed entrapped within it.

'Why is he just standing there? Won't he—?'

~VWUSH~

Before Felicia could complete her thought process, she found the entire scenery around her change—faster than even the blink of an eye.

She was no longer in the garden, but was instead seated on the pristine floor of the currently chaotic Gala Hall.

How she transitioned so fast to this location could only be explained by the one standing in front of her; but his attention was on the incident that kickstarted the chaos.

'W-what's that?' Felicia's eyes captured the scene as she trembled slightly.

'Who... is that?!'

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Chapter 592 The Intruder

Standing in midair, at the center of the hall, was a hooded fellow.

Their entire body was shrouded in a cheap-looking hooded cloak. Compared to the luxurious outfits that everyone had on, they might as well have been putting on rags.

The hooded cloak was faded white, and it obscured most of their body—just from the sheer size alone.

As the cloak danced in the air, the hood constantly hid their face while they looked down at the ones who currently challenged her.

Lucy, Trisha, Justin, Clark, Belle, and Yuri currently had her surrounded; each with their Skills activated and a look of determination on their faces.

The Royal Council Members were being safely guarded by Lucielle and Brutus, so while they too were ready to raise their weapons and activate their Skills to fight, they were more interested in safety.

Likewise, the security details present were guarding the Nobles who hired them, helping them escape the hall or to inconspicuously remain in a safe corner.

In this tension-filled room, the center-area of the hall was scorched and broken apart—almost as if it was caused by a culmination of Spells and Magic.

Still, the floating figure seemed unscathed.

"I believe I already told you... I'm not here to fight." They finally spoke up, and a feminine voice echoed from within the hood's shadows.

The build of the intruder was covered by the oversized traveler's outfit, but judging from their voice alone, it was easy to estimate that she was a woman.

What, then, did this woman desire?

Not only did she just crash into the most fortified area of the Alliance at the present moment, but even with so many powerful figures present, she was yet to be put down.

Yes, the current situation demanded that an evacuation and safeguarding of the important figures came first before any full-blown battle, so it wasn't in their best interests to go all-out.

Still, the fact that the stranger could push them to such straits meant she wasn't to be trifled with.

At the very least, it was safe to assume she was strong.

"W-who is that...?" Felicia whispered to herself, her eyes widening as she looked at the floating one.

There was something about her aura that made her shiver internally.

Felicia's Class was [Harlot], and it allowed her to determine the worth of someone or something by just a glance.

It was how she was able to turn her luck around after leaving the Capital.

Worth was mostly determined by Class and Level, but also on an individual's disposition and how much benefit they could offer her.

Right now, as she was looking at the hooded entity with glittering eyes, she could only see one thing.

—JACKPOT!

The lady was oozing power and good fortune. Plus, she also seemed to be of high standing.

It was difficult to put into words, but this was the first time Felicia felt something this intense. She knew instinctively that she had to take this chance while it remained.

"W-what do you want?!" She yelled out, causing the attention of the hooded lady and everyone else who faced her to look in Felicia's direction.

She instantly felt a pressure fall upon her, making sweat leak out of her skin.

A part of her regretted speaking up, but she also bit her lip and hoped for the best of results.

As a certified opportunist, she prayed for good luck.

But—

"Rey Skylar... I'm searching for him."

—It seemed the good fortune wasn't meant to be hers this time.

As soon as Felicia heard what the hooded lady was after, she glanced to the boy who stood by her side, standing a little ahead.

He was smiling.

'D-did he know all along? Does he know who she is? That she was after him?'

That would explain a lot—like why he was calm despite the unexpected explosion.

Felicia was dumbstruck at that moment. She wanted to seize the opportunity and get on the floating lady's good graces, but before she could say something—perhaps tell the woman what she wanted to know—the boy beside her stepped forward.

"The guy you're searching for is me."

"You...?"

Rey's smile broadened as he walked a few more steps. His confident stride was completely opposite from the tension in the air.

With a snap of his fingers, the glass cup he held vanished, and his now unoccupied hand went straight into his hair.

Upon straightening it, and staring high so he could lock eyes with the intruder, he made the declaration.

"I am Rey Skylar."

Rey was initially annoyed when the explosion occurred.

He was about to be kissed by Felicia before it happened, and that was something he had been looking forward to since the beginning of their conversation.

Of course, it wasn't the kiss that excited him—at least, not for the most part.

It was the Skill he would gain from it.

'If she kisses me, her [Lover's Promise] Skill will activate. I'll be able to copy it then.'

The Skill's ability allowed the user to compel anyone to make an unbreakable 'promise' with them.

This promise could be anything—ranging from running an errand for them, or being their slave for life.

It all depended on the user and their intentions.

Since Rey had lost his Mind Control Skills, he figured it would be a very handy one to have. Unfortunately, right as he was about to get it, the explosion and commotion took over.

It was annoying!

Still, Rey remained calm and analyzed what happened—using his practically divine senses to completely assimilate everything that was going on in the hall at the timers

As it turned out, even though the Otherworlders, with the air of a few others, hanged up on the sole figure, they could not subdue her.

It made him curious.

However, this only lasted for a second. The moment his senses met her, and he got a whiff of her oddly familiar scent... he realized it instantly.

—The identity of the stranger!

And now, as he stood beneath her, indulging in the sweet fragrance only she could give off, his grin widened even more.

"You... are Rey?" The voice seemed a bit hesitant—almost as though surprised but also excited.

"Yes. This is my real face."

As soon as he said this, the hooded fellow descended, and the hood that covered her face completely flew away, revealing the pure white hair, pale skin, and absolutely gorgeous face that was hidden underneath.

Long ears perked up as her blue eyes widened, staring straight into Rey's exposed one.

"It's been a while, Esme. You really did come for me, didn't you?" Rey said as he took one more step forward.

His heart was racing despite his best efforts to control it, and he couldn't help himself from smiling just from looking at her face.

She was just as beautiful as he remembered, and even in silence... her face told him of a million words.

As he advanced, she advanced as well.

As this continued, the tension climaxed, until the two of them were mere inches away from each other.

Esme raised her hand, reaching for Rey's cheek.

'A slap?!' He initially thought.

He wouldn't be surprised if she did that. He left her stranded in a Dungeon for months, and here he was smiling so sheepishly at her.

Who wouldn't get annoyed?

However, contrary to his expectation, her fingers landed softly on his cheek and she gave him the softest kind of look a girl could give a boy.

She could see glitters in her eyes as she stared at him, not even caring about the people around.

"You don't look as bad as I imagined." She whispered, her smile broadening.

"You don't look bad at all."

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Chapter 593 What Esme Saw [Pt 1]

[Months Earlier]

"This marks the 11th day I've been stuck here, without any sign of Rey appearing, or any contact from him at all..."

This voice, tired and weary, reverberated within the vast and ancient walls that surrounds the one who spoke.

Echoes danced in the air constantly.

"Food and water supply ran out a while back, as they weren't meant to last this long. Even though I rationed them, that was hardly enough."

As the lips of the speaker moved, a warbling object before her glowed.

It was recording her every words, which in turn cast a bright light on her face as it did so—revealing her beautiful face.

Esme was seated at the center of the massive hall on the ground floor of the Grand Calamity Dungeon, her sight solely focused on the exit that stood right before her eyes.

"As I speak, I have finally made up my mind to finally leave this place. I have left a message here so if Rey ever returns, he'll be able to know of my current decision."

She stood up from her position, her attire a long faded cloak that covered her entire body. The hood could also shroud her face, but she let it down for now, allowing her long hair to cascade as she stole one final glance around her.

She had spent an awful amount of time all alone in this place, gathering the rest of the spoils that she and Rey didn't collect together.

Thankfully, Miasma in the Dungeon didn't prove to be too much of an issue for her thanks to her Enchanted Items as well as her ample supply of Mana that deflected it all.

The more time passed, the thinner the corrupted energy in the air was, so at some point it became nearly nonexistent.

The result was her being as healthy as possible—save for malnutrition and exhaustion.

'I've been scouring the entire Dungeon by myself, searching for the Ground Floor for so long. I finally found it, so...'

There really was no compelling reason for her to remain in the Dungeon.

"Rey is most likely in danger; which is the only reason I can think of that he hasn't returned yet. I have no idea what is happening in the outside world too, so there's that."

Everything at the moment pointed towards her leaving.

"I suppose this is farewell to my life in the Dungeon." She moved forward, and in a single breath, she appeared right before the massive door.

"Here I come, Rey!"

[The Present]

"You have no idea how lost I was when I came out of that place." Esme groaned as she plopped into the soft bed in Rey's room.

She took in a deep breath, feeling the softness that her body had desperately missed for months.

Right beside where she was, standing as he watched her speak, was Rey. He was smiling, but silent.

Esme kept speaking regardless.

"I didn't know where the Dungeon had vanished to, but it most definitely wasn't the Adventurers City. It was a remote region to the North—close to where the war with the Dragons was taking place."

"Really?" Rey finally spoke, his face revealing some measure of surprise.

In all honesty, his next move—after returning from the Adventurers City and finding no trace of Esme—was to begin his journey from the exit of the Dunegon and investigate things from that point.

There was a chance that Esme could leave clues as to her whereabouts, so it would be a sensible approach to things.

The problem was that tracking her down that way would be a bit difficult, considering it had been a long time since she left the Dungeon already.

Still, since the Adventurers City plan didn't work out, it had been his only option.

... Until now.

"Yes! It was rough getting back there. I couldn't even afford to leave any trace of myself, just in case I would attract stray enemies; like Dragons or Monsters."

"There were Monsters there? And stray Dragons? You encountered them?"

"Yeah." She said, chuckling to herself as she remembered those times.

A smug smile sort of replaced her tired expression, and she looked somewhat proud of herself after her brief moment of recollection.

"It's thanks to their sacrifice that I was able to Level Up some more and become so strong."

"Ahh..." Rey mumbled, still staring at Esme while he remained standing.

"So that's what happened, huh? Why you didn't arrive on time?"

Once Rey asked this question, Esme's face darkened a little.

The very thin tension in the air slowly began to gain prominence, and a particular feeling of unease wafted everywhere.

Rey could feel it—something was wrong somewhere.

"Killing the Monsters and Dragons was helpful and all, but I was really worried about you, Rey." She stared intensely at Rey, finally sitting up.

"I wanted to reach the Capital as soon as possible, so after figuring out where I was, I figured flying south—as fast as I possibly could—would allow me to reach you as soon as possible."

She was able to somehow solve the food problem thanks to killing Monsters and cooking them—the edible ones, of course.

As for water... well... she could use her Skill to produce it.

All in all, she could store the food in her Spatial Ring and travel for as long as possible to reach her destination.

"So... what happened?" Rey pushed, his expression as composed as he could make it.

Esme's darkened face was yet to let up.

"I changed my mind after seeing the civilizations I would have to fly past."

"Hm?" Raising a brow, Rey now stared at Esme with confusion.

"Civilization? There isn't any that far North, though."

"That's what you think. Or should I say... that's what 'they' want you to think."

Rey's confusion deepened even further.

"Who's they? The people of that civilization?"

"No. The Alliance. The United Human Alliance... they're not the only civilization of humans that exist within H'Trae."

Rey's eyes widened as soon as he heard those words.

When he first arrived in this world, he often considered the possibility of other smaller nations of humans that existed in the Western Continent, so he learned more about the world he was living in.

But, based on every record in the Library, the United Human Alliance was the only standing civilization of mankind.

They were humanity's only nation.

'Based on what I saw on the map, I often wondered why there was so much barren land that was yet to be explored; especially during economic crisis. Yes, they were to the North, but these lands weren't too close to the battlefield. Besides, if soldiers were going to be deployed to the battlefield anyway, wouldn't it be much more useful to have strongholds close to the battlefield?'

But... records don't lie; or that's what is meant to be the case.

From what Esme just said, though, Rey's entire understanding of the world changed.

"There are smaller nations on the continent who lack the resources or power that is available to the United Human Alliance. They wallow in poverty and constantly dwell in insecurity. I passed by a few before my conscience couldn't take it anymore, so I decided to help."

In essence, Esme ended up being a hero to the rest of humanity.

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Chapter 594 What Esme Saw [Pt 2]

Esme ended up building strongholds for the people in those settlements and teaching them a few things they could use to develop their lands.

She aided in their agriculture, helped to defeat the Monsters that terrorized them, and solved a lot of their crisis; both internal and external.

The process was long and arduous—hence the reason for her late arrival.

"You should have seen them, Rey. They looked so miserable..."

To say his heart ached upon hearing all about what Esme witnessed would be an understatement.

"I... always thought I was helping all of humanity by siding with the Alliance. But, I guess I was wrong." He mumbled.

"I was only helping some."

"Yeah. From what I heard, the Alliance doesn't even bother with these small regions. I find that to be very distasteful." Esme's face darkened even further as she frowned.

"The people in charge here... I despise them."

"Is that why you barged in and caused such a commotion? You didn't care about them?" Rey chuckled as he sat on the bed, right beside her.

"It's not funny, Rey. The people out there were suffering greatly, yet the Alliance that's meant to be aiding humanity sat by and did nothing!"

"No, Esme. You're being a little too shortsighted." Rey sighed, finally settling in on the bed, crossing his legs as he sat up.

"What?"

"We still have insufficient information to blame the Alliance for the suffering of those people."

"Did you not hear a word that I said? Those people were—!"

"I did. I heard you quite well. And I understand that those people have been through rather unfortunate times."

"Then—!"

"It, in no way, means the United Human Alliance is at fault here." Rey sighed.

The United Human Alliance was—at its core—an amalgamation of different countries and cultures. When the war of the Dragons came, they gathered their strength together to fight.

"So it only follows that the Nations you saw were excluded from the amalgamation—either of their own accord, or due to their inability to reach the standards of an alliance."

"What are you talking about?"

"You said the United Human Alliance is doing nothing to help them, but is that really true?"

"Y-yeah. I mean..."

"Who is currently fighting in the war against the Dragons?" Rey asked, his tone as calm as possible.

"..."

Esme said nothing to the question. Perhaps because she already knew the obvious answer.

"The Alliance is actively fighting the war, and to do that they need all the help they can get. It makes no logical sense that they would ignore potential fighting power, so chances are that the Nations in question are the ones at fault here."

Esme's face twisted the moment she heard Rey refer to the very people she saved—the ones who suffered before her eyes—as the ones to blame.

"Re, you—"

"I'm sure they told you something along the lines of how the Alliance abandoned them, or how they were helpless against the might of the Dragons, while the Alliance was better off. They said all those things, presenting themselves to be the victims... but is that really the case?"

Any side would always tell a story that suited their narrative. As long as Ingroup bias existed, the way their perspective would be shoved into a potentially neutral scenario would often present themselves as being in the right.

"Logically looking at it, there's no reason why the Alliance would abandon those people unless, for some reason, they refused to be a part of the Alliance."

Rey could already think of a few reasons why that could be the case.

'These are small nations, so chances are that they don't have much to offer in terms of resources or military power. It's possible that they wouldn't have much of governmental control within the Alliance, and even their highest leaders would be nothing more than Nobles.'

In such a scenario, some people would rather cling to the ultimate power they had as the ruler of a small land than to merely be little fish in a much faster ocean.

In essence, it was better to rule in hell than become a servant in heaven.

"Are you saying they lied to me? I don't think so, Rey. I can see their Alignments, remember? I also know when someone is being dishonest with me."

"It's possible that only the leaders are aware of the deal with the Alliance, and they refused. The people were perhaps fed another narrative, which passed around until everyone believed they were right and the Alliance was wrong."

"But the leaders were also—!"

"In a place that has such insecurity and crisis, it's possible that the previous leaders who were approached with the deal and refused are already dead. It's been over ten years since the Alliance formed, after all."

Esme fell silent once again.

Her frown was yet to disappear, but she was also not as headstrong about her views as she was moments earlier.

Still, she didn't want to believe that the victims she rescued were perhaps not as innocent as she thought. And even if some were, if the narrative they fed her was wrong, then the Alliance was not the enemy she thought they were.

"Of course, there's a chance that I'm wrong. After all, the Alliance could have some hidden motives I am unaware of. There's also the fact that they hid the information about those other Nations from us as Otherworlders—which means they didn't want us to know about them."

Rey could understand why that information was kept secret. If the other Nations were uncooperative, and the Alliance itself was in a crisis, it wouldn't make any utilitarian sense to divide the attention of their saviors to those places.

Attention had to be focused on the group that was actively fighting against the Dragons.

'Still, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth...' His eye narrowed a little.

Even though he just supported the United Human Alliance in front of Esme, he didn't like the fact that he was made unaware of the plight of these people.

This was where his logic clashed with his emotions.

"Ultimately, the Alliance's existence is to combat the great evil that is the Dragon Scourge. I'm not saying the framework is perfect. No, it's far from that. There are many unsavory parts about them. Still... we can't blame them for every misfortune that has befallen these people." He concluded as he placed his hand on Esme's shoulders.

"I... get it. But, Rey, the solution I offered them was only temporary..."

Rey figured that out as well. The damage that had been done to these people for over a decade could not be resolved by Esme in only a matter of months.

In fact, she barely spent a week in each settlement, so it wasn't like she could do much work for each Nation.

"Even if it's the fault of their leaders that they weren't able to join the Alliance and enjoy its benefits, I don't want to sit by and let them suffer like that."

Rey instantly placed both hands on Esme's shoulders and smiled.

"I also don't want that."

Their eyes met once again—a mix of red and blue, reflecting in each Iris.

They both smiled.

"I'll speak to the Royal Council about it. Want to come with? They could really use your perspective on the matter."

There was a high chance that the Royal Council, or the upper echelon of the Alliance, hadn't had contact with any of these nations for so long.

They probably remained unaware of how dire their situation was.

"If we can sort something out, some kind of compromise... we can help those people."

Esme nodded as she heard that, words of gratitude leaking from her glossy lips.

"Though... it might take a little convincing to have you appear before them as a consultant considering the way you trashed their important event..."

Rey's trailing voice reminded Esme of the big blunder she made hours ago.

At the time, she was plenty upset with the Royal Council and didn't want to follow proper protocol. She simply stormed into the hall and demanded to see Rey.

Of course, she wasn't going to hurt anyone—as long as they didn't push her to it—but that didn't mean she had to be nice to them.

Realizing all of that now, and seeing how she was acting on a flawed notion, Esme covered her flushed face in embarrassment.

"Ahh... what have I done?" She shrieked, shaking her head.

Rey laughed at this.

"And I even did that in front of all your friends. What will they think of me now? They'll think I'm crazy and violent or something..."

Rey found it cute that Esme was worried about what his friends would think of her. Still...

"I should be the one more worried."

Esme raised her face as Rey said that. He had pink hues spreading all over his cheeks.

"I mean... the way we interacted, and then hugged, with all eyes watching us... I'm sure some rumors will start flying around."

He had initially thought that perhaps some would make a big deal of his dance with Lucielle, but after the whole stunt with Esme, he could see things going the way of the latter.

"Just brace yourself for what comes next."

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Chapter 595 Special Friend

The two spoke for hours.

It was just like old times... with them babbling on and on about varying topics and stories.

It went without saying that Rey had to explain himself and the reason he was late—apologizing for what he determined to be caused by his weakness.

Of course, Esme would not have that.

"There's no way you could have known about or prepared for such a calamity. Besides, if I was stronger... you wouldn't have had to face it all alone. It's not your fault!"

Her words reinforced what Ater and his friends had told him, yet somehow hearing her tell him this put his simmering heart at ease.

As always, Esme just always had an atmosphere about her that relaxed him.

Not once did he need to struggle with controlling his emotions, and the system also didn't shut them off at any period.

He was worried and cautious at first, but not anymore. Esme was just the kind of person he could be comfortable with.

No... that wasn't quite it.

"I expected you to be a lot more awkward about all this..." Esme admitted at some point as she smiled at Rey.

Her hand was placed on her cheek as her smile broadened.

Merely staring into her eyes made his heart leap, yet there was no response from the System.

In fact, none of his other physiological reactions—since he encountered Esme—triggered the Class Privilege's effects.

'I initially thought I wasn't flustered enough because it's Esme, but the System has intervened for even less displays of emotion in the past. So what's happening here?'

Rey was surprised and confused at this point.

However, he had a theory—or rather, a question.

'Is the System being biased here?' When he thought about it, Esme had always been favored by the System.

Even now, he was being told to help her out.

That was definitely not a sign of a Side Quest, as Rey had already figured out long ago. It seemed, by all regards, that she was being protected by the System.

And she wasn't the only one.

'The other Elves I met also had similar stuff written in their Additional Information.'

That meant, for some reason, Elves were special in this world.

'Maybe the System does not register any emotion generated from me towards her to be harmful, so it filters all of that out. Does that mean it'll be the same with the rest of the Elves?'

He found himself growing ever curious as he stared at Esme, just in time for time to quicken so he could answer her statement.

"Awkward about what? Showing my face?"

"Mhm! You made such a big deal about it for so long that I never expected you'd show it to me that easily."

"Well... perhaps I'm not the Rey you knew from back then."

Esme laughed as she shook her head. Instantly pushing her face forward, she brought it close to Rey's

It was so close that they could feel each other's breaths.

"No... you're Rey alright." She smiled. "Even if I can no longer see your Status Information, there's no way I wouldn't be able to recognize you."

Rey didn't know why he blushed at that very moment.

As if that wasn't enough of a shock for him—

~VWUSH~

A sudden black swirl formed within the room and Ater stepped out of it with a casual sense of formality.

Rey was frozen in place as he witnessed Ater arrive.

Esme's innocent face also turned as she gazed upon the tall, sleek frame of Rey's familiar.

"Mas... ah, apologies for the inconvenience. Please continue."

"Ater wai—!"

~VWUSH!~

Before Rey could say any more, Ater vanished from his position. His disappearance was too instant that even Rey was stunned.

His flustered state was immediately suppressed, reminding him of his current condition.

"Haa... that guy. I'm sure he now has the wrong idea."

Esme innocently turned her face to Rey and gave him a quizzical look.

"Wrong idea how?"

"He... ah... well, he probably thought we were about to kiss... or something like that." Rey looked away, blushing even harder than normal.

Moments like this made him want his emotions to be suppressed, but he also liked that he could feel things this intensely.

"Kiss... huh? I've never had one before." Esme murmured.

"How does it feel like?"

Rey found his heart racing upon hearing that. One glance at Esme's serious and curious eyes made him nearly give out.

Yet the System did not intervene at all!

"W-why would you even ask me that?" For the first time since forever, Rey stuttered, fidgeting a little as he analyzed the question she asked him.

"Well... you've kissed before, haven't you?"

"How can you be so sure?!" Rey swiftly responded, his voice raised a little.

Yes, Belle kissed him at some point, but it wasn't like 'he' kissed 'her'. In fact, wasn't he the victim in that entire mishap?

So, yes... technically he hadn't 'kissed' anyone yet. Someone kissing him didn't count one bit.

"Well, I—"

"It's fine, Rey. I was just asking because I was curious. If you're acting like this, then you've probably never kissed before." Even though this was the excuse he was going for, hearing Esme say it like that hurt his pride.

He could feel something in his chest shatter.

"I'll ask a more experienced person about it."

Rey nearly clutched his chest upon hearing that. Sure, he didn't have much of an experience when it came to these things, but...

"In any case, answer me already." Esme began to shift away from Rey.

Her face departed from his until they retained reasonable distance from each other.

"Why did you decide to show me your face?"

As the question floated in the air, Rey brought himself back to reality. He took in a deep breath, allowing the sweet scent that now filled the room to enter his nostrils and permeate his body.

He was silent for a few seconds, feeling Esme's gaze on him through it all.

Then, he spoke up.

"I just... didn't want to hide anymore."

Surely, Rey had more than enough time to get into disguise and face her with a mask or with any face of his choosing.

Yet, the thought never even crossed his mind.

He simply wanted to see her, and he wanted her to see him as well.

That was all there was to it.

"I'm really happy you're safe, Esme. After everything that has happened... it really is more than a relief to have you right before my eyes."

Esme touched his hand with hers, allowing him to feel her warm and soft touch.

She gave him a glowing smile at that moment.

"I'm not going anywhere, Rey. I've also gotten a bit stronger since last time, so hopefully I'm not a burden to you anymore."

Rey chuckled as he saw her Stats.

"With those numbers... I doubt you will be."

[STATUS WINDOW]

- Name: Esme
- Race: Half-Elf (Human and Elf)
- Class: Grand Elementalist (A-Tier)
- Level: 127 (28.14% EXP)
- Life Force: 360/360 (+360) [500]
- Mana Level: 700/700 (+700)
- Combat Ability: 503 (+503)

- Stat Points: 0
- Skills (Exclusive): [Absolute Appraisal]
- Skills (Non-Exclusive): [Absolute Magic Mastery]. [Absolute Magic Application]. [Absolute Mana Recovery]. [Absolute Elemental Control]. [Grand Executioner]
- Alignment: Chaotic Good

[Additional Information]

A genius, even by Elven Standards... with a special heritage and connection to the World.

She is your ally and friend.

... Help her.

[End Of Information]

Rey smiled as he saw all this.

'As expected.'

*

Chapter 596 The Sleeping Beauty

"Can I ask you something, Rey?"

Esme was back to laying on Rey's bed—not that he minded, of course.

At some point, a thought did cross his mind that once Esme left, her sweet flowery scent would remain imprinted on his bed.

He didn't consider this a bad thing, though, so he let her have at it.

'But... what would Alicia think if my room starts smelling like a different woman?'

He had heard from someone that women had that kind of superpower, but he wasn't so sure about how valid the claim was.

Still, was it a risk he was willing to take?

The fact that he still let Esme lay on his bed proved that to be the case.

"What is it?" He responded with a question of his own.

With the two of them already talking about the Grand Calamity, Rey's rising fame, and pretty much all of the current things that had happened in Esme's absence, she was pretty much up to speed with his life.

As for Rey, he also got the gist of what Esme had been up to for the past couple of months.

It only took four to five hours, give or take, but the time was well spent. There were no holes or gaps in their memories any longer.

Plus, as a bonus, they enjoyed every second of the interaction.

'I initially thought Esme would need to rest and freshen up before we began our long talk, but I was wrong.'

Thanks to her high Level and Stats, she could go on for a while without getting too exhausted.

She also claimed to have rested considerably before arriving at the Capital and gatecrashing the Gala.

As for freshening up—even though Rey didn't smell any slightly bad odor from Esme, but rather the opposite—he still thought it would be nice for her to take a long shower after such an arduous trip.

That was until she reminded him of her elemental abilities—one of which was generating and controlling water.

She had also taken a long, hot bath before arriving at the Gala.

Rey could no longer argue with any of her points, so he couldn't wiggle out of a conversation with her—not that he wanted to anyway.

His introspection into all of these things was interrupted by Esme's request.

"Can I see her? Alicia, I mean..."

The moment he heard this, Rey's body shook a little. The System controlled his emotions at that moment.

'Damnit!' He could never get used to the forced suppression now that he was aware of its occurrence.

The sensation was subtle, but after improving sensitivity to that facet of his being, he felt every hit.

'But why was it suppressed? Because I reacted as a result of Alicia and not Esme?'

Rey was reminded of what had happened moments earlier; with Ater and how flustered he became.

'I see now...' His thoughts trailed as he realized the deal of the System.

If any other element other than that of the favored one entered the mix, it would inadvertently react.

'Looks like, in the end, I still have to be in control of my emotions...'

In order to prevent their complete erosion.

"You don't have to if you don't want to, but... I would just like to see her."

"Why?" Rey's calmer voice took over, and Esme noticed it instantly.

Rey could tell that much from how her brows were raised in response to his complete change in tone.

"Is it acting up again? The emotion dampening thing?"

Rey said nothing. He only nodded, and then sighed not long after.

"I see..."

Rey had told Esme all about the Class Privilege problem he was dealing with. However, when he mentioned it, he told her that it wasn't working when he was with her.

That made her happy for some reason.

But now, after his reaction upon hearing about Alicia, he knew she could already guess what was happening.

"It's okay. We don't have to talk about her if—"

"No, it's fine." Rey swiftly responded, interrupting her.

He rose up from the bed and cleared his throat.

"I was just caught off guard is all..."

Esme also rose from her comfortable position.

"You sure?"

The moment she stood, a sudden warp in space occurred, causing everything around them to shift instantly.

~VWUSH~

Within less than the blink of an eye, the two of them were in a different room.

There was a bed positioned succinctly close to the windows, with a very pretty girl with long brown hair asleep on it.

Esme was still taking in the change that happened when Rey's voice filled the room.

"That's Alicia." He stepped forward as he uttered those words, his eyes on the girl who wouldn't wake up.

A slightly conflicted expression filled his face, but all of them remained barely expressed as he became silent.

"Oh..."

Esme light steps echoed softly within the hall as she stepped forward as well. She silently looked at Alicia's face for a minute or so.

No one said anything within that period.

Then—

"She's really pretty." Esme said with a compassionate smile.

"Yeah. She is." He croaked.

If he tried releasing more emotions, he knew the fate that would befall him. As such, he kept every expression to the minimum.

"You should see her when she's awake. She can get so excited would befall him. As such, he kept every expression to the minimum.

and passionate about stuff..." Rey began as he looked at the sleeping beauty.

"Even though she can be very fierce, she's the kindest person I know. I... even though I know the entire disaster wasn't my fault... I sometimes... wish... I was... mm... I was... there to do something."

Rey had to keep pausing with almost every word due to his emotions constantly rising as he spoke.

It was almost comparable to someone trying their hardest not to cry when talking about something very sad.

He had to keep stopping himself. Else...

"She must have been so scared. Even when she saw me... I can only imagine her shock. Did she feel betrayed? I lied to her, after all..."

Rey was scared to know.

However, what was more frightening than that was that he would never get to know.

"What if... she never opens her eyes? What will I... what will she... I... can't..." His lips trembled at this point, and he couldn't say any more.

He just kept stopping at that point, unable to continue.

It felt so frustrating.

He wanted to let his emotions loose, but the walls just wouldn't let him.

"I..."

At that moment, Rey felt something warm surround his body as Esme hugged him.

Her body pressed against him, with her arms wrapping themselves around his broader body. He had no idea how much he needed it until the embrace finally came.

His surprised face finally had tears streaming down them as he felt Esme's warmth seep through every part of his body.

"I can't lose her... Esme."

"You won't." She whispered into his ears as she stroked the back of his head.

He almost felt like a baby in her arms despite him being taller than she was.

Silent sobs escaped his lips as more tears flowed. The comfort he felt in her arms was more than enough to make him let those emotions out.

Then, as he drowned himself in the maelstrom of emotions, Esme spoke in a soft, fleeting whisper.

"I can see why you like her so much..."

*

Chapter 597 Insight

"For the longest time since I came to this world, I've always known what I wanted."

Rey and Esme sat on chairs as they remained in Alicia's room. The former was staring at the girl's sleeping body, while the latter only looked at him in silence.

"I initially wanted to gain the recognition of my classmates. But, after seeing their reactions toward me, I decided to grow stronger than all of them without showing my strength."

Slowly, his motivations and goals had changed over time. However, through them all, he still had some measure of clarity.

His goals were always achievable; with a clear path he had to tread.

To get strong, all he had to do was kill Monsters in the Dungeon. Stopping the Criminal Empire just meant taking out everyone on the board.

Even helping his classmates out, or conquering the Grand Calamity Class Dungeon had clear objectives and methods to achieve them.

"But... right now, I have no idea what to do."

He was the savior of humanity, so he had to help them defeat the Dragons. He also had to protect everyone close to him in the process.

Then, there was Alicia.

He had to figure out a way to cure her, but he didn't even know where to start.

"I... have these goals and ambitions, but how do I achieve them? I've messed up so many times already. I no longer have any confidence in my plans, and even if i did... what exactly am I supposed to do about all of this?"

Rey knew he sounded pathetic, but these were words he couldn't utter in front of anyone else.

He felt stuck somehow.

"I'm supposed to be the strong and smart one—the one who has come up with so many plans and led so many people..."

As Ralyks, he was revered as such.

And now, the same was expected of him. But Rey was nothing like that.

He was just, in principle, a 16 year old boy who was blessed with enough power and information to act accordingly.

But, when faced with a situation where both his power and information failed him—like in the case of Alicia's curse—he had to cave in.

"What should I do?" Rey whispered, turning his eyes to Esme.

It was clear he was lost at the moment. All the ideas he had either couldn't be trusted, or wouldn't work regardless.

What he needed now was certainty.

But—

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

—Asking for such an answer from someone equally powerless and ignorant, if not more, was unfair.

Esme could not give him the answer he desired.

"What about you, Emil?" Rey muttered, already desperate for an answer—any answer—that would solve everything.

However...

~I apologize, Master. I have no idea what to do...~

... Even the Symbiote was unable to help.

For the first time ever, she fell silent and let Rey brood in peace.

The solemn air of the room remained like this for a while as Rey closed his eyes and breathed a consistent strep breath.

After some time, as he opened his eyes, his voice echoed softly.

"What about you, Ater?"

~VWUSH~

The black suited man presented himself before Rey, bowing his head slightly as he appeared from the darkness.

"What should I do?" The boy murmured, still on his seat.

A smile formed on Ater's face as he raised his head, stood upright, placed a hand in his pocket, and responded casually.

"Depart from this place and go to the land of the Elves."

As Rey heard this, something flickered within his eyes.

He instantly raised his head and saw Ater's confident smile showering him with nothing short of certainty.

"What will I find there?"

"A cure for your friend. Resources for your business. Allies for humanity. And some answers to the questions that you ask."

The sad, mopey expression on Rey's face instantly vanished as he hardened his eyes and straightened his expression.

"Elaborate."

"There is someone who goes by the Oracle there who could solve your problems. The Elves revere them as the mouthpiece of nature, and I suspect they can reverse the curse inflicted by the world."

"R-really...?"

"They should also possess some answers that we seek. And since the Elves revere them, bringing them to your side means that humanity will be able to count on the Elves as allies. Finally, the land of the Elves is rich in the kind of materials that the Reaper Group desperately needs." Ater stepped forward, his confidence unwavering.

"There is no place you ought to be at the moment more than the Land of the Elves."

As Rey heard this, his eyes widened considerably.

Ater was right!

"Did you find all of this out just recently? Is that why you've been missing for a while?"

The smile of the Familiar only broadened as he heard this.

"Not exactly. I learned a considerable deal during the investigative task that you entrusted me with all those months ago. However—"

"Then why didn't you say anything sooner?" Rey felt himself get agitated, but lost all the pent-up emotions almost instantly.

Whether it was correct to be annoyed at Ater at the moment, Rey couldn't help but feel that way once he heard what he was saying.

'If you knew, why wait until now?'

"—My investigations were cut short due to the incident at the Capital, when you nearly lost your life. I ceased my investigation efforts and returned to your side as soon as possible."

During Rey's comatose period, he was busy protecting the Capital and also rebuilding it—following the strict orders of his Master.

As such, he never got to completing his investigation.

"Upon your return, and the Capital's near reconstruction, I reckoned it was time to conclude the investigation and sufficiently complete all my data."

After hearing Ater's rationale, Rey felt stupid for getting annoyed.

He of all people had to know how dangerous incomplete information could be. Ater was most likely trying to protect him by not spilling the beans too early.

'If he got my hopes up without completely verifying his findings or concluding his investigation, it could have ended dangerously.'

Once again, Ater was right.

"Currently, I possess sufficient information to properly inform you of the details of my mission in the Land of the Elves as well as all my findings."

Rey could see Esme fidget a little anytime the Elves were mentioned, and he understood why.

He turned to her side, intending to suggest that she should leave the room for the both of them to discuss.

Or perhaps he and Ater could leave the room to discuss somewhere else.

But—

"Don't worry about me, Rey. I would like to listen to this, if you don't mind."

Rey nodded slowly and glanced at Ater, who also nodded in agreement.

"Alright. Just tell me once you get uncomfortable." He whispered.

Esme affirmed this and clenched both her fist, remembering her rather unsavory experience with the Elves, but still unable to shrug off her curiosity about them.

Ater smiled at her, noticing all of this, though she didn't notice.

He swiftly turned his focus back to his Master, who was now paying rapt attention to any word that would be uttered.

"Go on, Ater." Rey spoke up, locking his fingers with one another as he sat upright on his chair.

"Tell me everything."

*

Chapter 598 Ater's Experience [Pt 1]

[Months Earlier]

Ater watched.

The Elves all remained on the ground—powerless as they all succumbed to the might of his Master's Magic.

Rey Skylar, his sole proprietor, then commanded him to take care of things from that moment onward—giving a most important task.

'I am to spy upon the Elves and gather as much information as I can within the 10-day Interval before Master's departure to the Front Lines.'

His task wasn't very difficult. What he found a little challenging was deciding how to go about it.

'Should I eliminate one of them and take their place using Shape-shifting?'

He could even mimic their scent, if need be, so as not to attract any suspicion in the slightest.

'The Elves have incredible senses, but I'm not an incorrigible trickster for nothing.' Ater mused.

Besides, these fools had dared to defy and insult his Master.

If things were up to him, he would have slaughtered all of them and initiated his mission in a much more aggressive manner.

But no.

His Master had been explicit with his orders.

'This requires a certain level of... finesse.' Once he had that settled in his mind, he began to execute the task.

The first thing was to utilize his Skill [Possession] to enter into one of the Elves and completely take over their body.

He would use that opportunity to gain access to their memories as well.

Once he decided upon that, it was easy to account for the person to target first.

'It feels a little vile to do so, but I have to admit that this one is the most suited for the task at the moment.'

He thought this as he stared at Aurora El Slaviaria.

Within a second, his solid body grew dark and lost any form. He became a dark mist, and the billowing smoke began to draw closer to the sleeping Aurora.

~FSHIII...~

He seeped into her nostrils ever so subtly, granting himself a preeminent seat in her body.

At that exact moment, Aurora opened her eyes.

No, it wasn't her.

The darkness that covered the whites of her eyes did not appear to be hers, neither did the smile that she wore on her face.

This was Ater in control.

"Now then... to set things up." He looked at the rest of the Elves—a total of twelve—his grin growing wider.

Utilizing the Magic of the Elf's body, he used Wind to carry all of them so they floated.

'Looking through her memories, it seems their hideout isn't too far from here. I'll take them all there first.'

And that was precisely what he did.

In his usual efficient manner, Ater led all the floating Elves to their haven—a place decorated with exotic looking flowers and a sweet aroma that permeated the air.

The moment he entered the place and took a whiff, his body reacted instantly.

Her bluish green hair failed from side to side. Her tight grip on her staff loosened, and her pale skin seemed to spasm a bit.

'Muscle memory, huh? They appeared to have decorated this place so it's reminiscent of home. If that's the case, then the Land of the Elves surely must be worth exploring.'

Yes, Ater could sort through Aurora's memories to find out more about the land, but the further back a memory was, the longer it would take to get there.

Ater was still sorting out the surface level and recent memories, so was yet to fully investigate the scope of her mind.

'Now that we're here, I'll relinquish control over her body for now.'

That way, he could focus more on learning about her and her people. Also, by giving Aurora and the rest of the Elves agency, he would be able to study them to his satisfaction.

'Alright then... let the games begin.'

The Elves woke up quite a while later, and Aurora gathered the women together in order to make their plans to return.

Ater watched everything from within her and internally cast his perspective on the matter.

'So they plan to cross the vast seas that separate both continents with Runic Magic. That's rare, even among Elves.'

The major difference between Runes and Spells was the utility that they offered.

Spells were spoken and granted instant results, while Runes were inscribed and could be stored for future use.

They could also be activated by people who didn't even use such Magic as long as they triggered its effects.

The same way Dungeon Traps operated was the same way any Rune would. There had to be inscriptions, Mana imbued within said inscription, and a catalyst that activated the effects.

'It sounds simple, but it's really not; especially in this case.'

Not only was Rune Magic very rare—even to the point where humanity had barely developed any proper theory, not to mention practice on it—but Spatial Magic was also very rare.

In essence, when analyzing the mere possibility of someone having a Rune Scroll that could teleport them over such a long distance, Ater felt it pertinent to acknowledge its impressive nature.

'I am not surprised that she has something of this sort, though. She's an esteemed Elder, after all.'

In Elven Society, their denizens were typically divided into two.

The Elders and the Young.

Elders had lived at least three hundred years, while Youngs referred to any Elf below that age.

There were several perks to being an Elder, one of which was getting a True Name.

The name Aurora El Slaviaria was one given to her once she became an Elder—mature enough to be granted another name other than the base one attributed to an Elf at birth.

Not only was she an Elder, but she was also an Esteemed one—

a member of the Esteemed Council, who governed The Elves and served as their guardian.

'The Magic in the Rune is not of her doing. There's someone else among the Elves who is capable of that, and they're the ones who possess the rare Magic.'

Ater could already tell, both from Aurora's memories and the conversation that was ensuing among the Elves, that her actions would be frowned upon by the rest of the community.

... Especially the other members of the Esteemed Council.

*

Chapter 599 Ater's Experience [Pt 2]

'It's quite brave of her to go against their wishes and come here; all for the sake of her people's survival.' Ater thought to himself.

The one who also aided her in this plan was also a member of the Council, but the fact that she wasn't here with Aurora showed that the Rune was as far as she was willing to go when it came to help.

'But it's thanks to all of these circumstances that this event has unfolded.' Ater couldn't help but smile devilishly as he watched the Elves huddle together and activate the power within the scroll.

~VWUUSH~

Once Aurora ripped the parchment into two, a bright light enveloped the space and power spread through everyone and everything around.

The howling of winds danced within the cave, once again causing the aroma permeating around to tingle the noses of the Elves once again.

"Will we ever return to this place?" Ater heard one of the Elves say.

If he remembered correctly, her name was Lila.

Aurora shook her head in response, though, just as he knew she would.

"My actions are in contradiction to the will of the Esteemed Council. I will most likely be punished for my transgression."

Despite saying this, her stern and resolute demeanor did not falter.

She remained steadfast in all her manners.

"I am aware of the sin that I have committed, so I accept my inevitable fate. The punishment I shall receive is of little consequence to me. As long as our people thrive and drive away the Dragons... that is all that matters."

Once again, Ater couldn't help but feel slightly touched by her genuine dedication.

He could relate to it somewhat when he considered how his Master often limited certain actions of his when they would be of utmost benefit to him.

Still, he could not complain.

'All in due time...'

~SHIIING!~

The radiant energy spread through everything that was within the circle, finally transporting everyone to the point where Ater recognised from her recently digested memories.

It was a beach on the other side of the world.

... The Eastern Continent.

As the group appeared on the beach, the salty breeze tousled their hair and carried the distant cry of gulls on its wings.

The sand stretched out before them, a vast expanse of golden grains that shimmered in the sunlight.

Seashells dotted the shoreline like treasures waiting to be discovered, their delicate forms glinting in the sun.

Ahead, just a stone's throw from the sandy edge, lay an exotic forest that seemed to beckon constantly.

The trees stood tall and straight, their branches reaching skyward in a canopy of greenery.

Colorful blooms adorned the forest floor, their petals painted in hues so vivid they seemed to defy reality. The scent of the flowers hung heavy on the air, mingling with the salty tang of the sea to create a heady perfume that intoxicated the senses.

All in all, it was a beautiful sight unlike anything within the world of humans.

'Ahh... here at last!' Ater grinned to himself as he sat back and watched it all.

As the group ventured closer, they were instantly surrounded by shadowy figures who appeared seemingly out of nowhere.

"Don't move!" They yelled out loud.

As soon as the arriving Elves heard this, they obeyed and watched as the new group of pointy-eared ones emerged from the forest's embrace.

Tension filled the air at that moment, in which Ater just smiled as he took it all in—almost as if he knew how it would turn out.

"Sister! You have finally returned!"

The leader of the surrounding Elves, who had green hair—and while she didn't look as pretty as Aurora, certainly had another kind of appeal about her—raised her voice as she neared Ater's host.

The two sisters hugged, also sniffing each other in the process; as was the custom of the Elves.

Unlike the doom and gloom that Aurora predicted, it seemed more like a warm homecoming than anything else. However, the worst was yet to come.

And Ater knew that well.

"It warms my heart that you have come to welcome me, Sister." Aurora spoke with sadness in her eyes.

"However, I am also aware that you are here for more than that reason."

The Elf that embraced her slowly nodded as the both of them drew away from each other. The faces of the surrounding Elves were also littered with sadness.

"Indeed. We are here to capture you and the Young Ones for your breach and present you before the esteemed council."

The Elf withdrew herself completely from Aurora and had a stern look on her face, almost as if the soft expression she had just moments ago was a lie.

"Do you wish to protest, or will you yield?"

Aurora turned to look at the Elves behind her and smiled at them with compassion—the kind a mother would give to their younglings.

"I yield."

Ater watched as they captured Aurora and her followers, beginning their journey unto the forest and towards the Elven settlement.

He couldn't help but muse at all that he saw.

'Well... this is quite the development.'

As the group ventured deeper into the forest, a palpable tension hung in the air like a thick fog.

The trees towered overhead, their branches intertwining to form a canopy that blocked out much of the sunlight.

Shadows danced on the forest floor, casting eerie shapes that seemed to shift and writhe with a life of their own.

The underbrush grew dense and tangled, making progress slow and arduous. Every step was met with resistance, as if the very earth itself sought to impede their journey.

Twisted roots snaked across the forest floor, tripping unwary travelers and threatening to ensnare them in their grasp.

Despite the lush beauty of their surroundings, a sense of unease settled over the group like a heavy cloak.

Every rustle of leaves, every snap of a twig, sent shivers down their spines as the Elves sometimes strained to catch a glimpse of whatever lurked in the shadows.

Clearly the woods weren't always safe.

The scouts were ahead of the main group to check for danger, and everyone was on high alert.

As for words, no one uttered any.

It was almost too boring for Ater to stand, but he endured it anyway.

The silence was broken only by the occasional hoot of a bird or the distant howl of a creature, their calls echoing through the forest like ominous warnings.

Each member of the group held their breath, their senses alert for any sign of danger lurking in the darkness.

But still, they pressed on, driven by a determination born of necessity.

After all... beyond these dense woods was the place they were all journeying to.

—The Elf Community.

Chapter 600 A Higher Existence

"After that, well... things got a lot more complicated."

Ater sat in midair before Rey and Esme, going over the rest of his adventures in the Elven Society that he found himself in. There were a lot of things he spoke about, and he practically dissected many facets of their community during his stay there.

"Aurora was going to be confined until punishment, so I had to get a new host. It would have been detrimental for me to remain trapped with her." Ater continued, explaining how he possessed one of the Young Ones.

Apparently, the younger Elves were not punished at all, since Aurora was the Elder among them, and she influenced them in that regard. Still, they all felt bad for their leader and constantly worried for her fate.

Perhaps that was their punishment in its own way.

"Not only did I explore the community itself, but I went and saw the surrounding lands. The Elves have a very rich ecosystem, with Mana saturating the air." Ater continued. "They have tons of natural resources we can exploit for production. Of the Great Dungeons that exist in this world, two are in the Eastern Continent, and one in particular is quite close to their community."

The more Ater went on, the more Rey and Esme realized just how much of a goldmine the Land of the Elves was. Not only did it provide an avenue to grow stronger, but it was practically a commercial jackpot.

"While it would be of great benefit to simply take away their resources and perhaps even control the populace to do our bidding... there is a bit of a problem. It was only when I realized it that I discovered the presence of a high existence in that continent."

Rey's brows were raised the moment he heard this. "High Existence?"

"The Oracle." Ater's eyes narrowed as he spoke. He was no longer smiling, so every word he spoke oozed sheer seriousness.

"The Oracle is the connection between the Elves and Nature and possesses the gift of divine revelation. They also see all that happens in the Land Of The Elves, which is how I was able to notice their existence."

Ater noticed someone—or something—was watching him throughout his stay in the Land of the Elves. It somewhat limited his investigations, but it also allowed him to test out a few things and arrive at a conclusion.

"The Oracle sees all. The Oracle knows all. The Elves believe this with all their hearts. If that's the case, then there is a high chance that they can help you with your Curse problem. And if that's the case—"

"We can't afford to be rough with the Elves." Rey mumbled slowly, to which Ater nodded.

Even now, Ater did not know the dwelling place of the Oracle. No one really knew where they stayed. When the Oracle desired to see someone, they would simply 'call' them to their presence. How this happened was still a mystery, but it was most probably Magic.

"They have a temple where they pray to Nature and request for the aid of The Oracle. If their prayers are answered, they are summoned to the Oracle's presence."

This was the most religious society that Rey had encountered since coming to this world, and it was pretty telling.

Humanity didn't really seem to have a religion. If they worshiped anything, it would perhaps be the Otherworlders.

Those who knew the Otherworlders personally wouldn't think to worship them. And as for any other God or Gods, there didn't really seem to be a full consensus or organized religion—at least not yet.

But the Elves were different.

They worshiped Nature, and The Oracle was the sole one who could directly converse with Nature. Hence, the only path to salvation.

"Do you think this Oracle will help us, though?" Rey asked with skeptical eyes, and Esme nodded in agreement to his question.

She also had high disbelief that such an entity would assist them.

"We just have to convince them somewhat. The Oracle's desire seems to be the flourishing of their people—maintaining order among the Elves. Right now, the Elves have a major problem on their hands. If we address that and aid them, perhaps they will aid us."

"And if they don't...?"

"We find another way. Besides, it's not like we'll be helping them for free. There are several other forms of payment that can be requested in exchange for assistance." Ater explained with calm determination.

The goal was to gain as much from the Elves without upsetting The Oracle.

"Do you really think sucking up to them would help? Like... I mean, I'm an Otherworlder, sure, but the Elves have made it perfectly clear how they feel about humans and Half Elves.

The mere fact that Ater had trespassed upon their land was a transgression that they weren't even sure The Oracle would forgive.

All in all, it was a probability.

"If the diplomatic approach doesn't work out, you could always be a lot more imposing. As an S-Tier existence, with multiple Divine Skills, I am certain you won't be ignored by such a high entity here."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same." Rey responded.

In the past, he might have preferred walking on eggshells and trying diplomatic strategies. However, there was no need to get hung up on things.

'The Elves are very stuck up. Trying to garner their favor would only hurt our case, the way I see it.' Rey's thoughts trailed.

Of course, he didn't plan to go there, guns blazing. He would try the peaceful approach first. However, if that wasn't effective, he would have to switch up his strategy to accommodate more extreme measures.

"The Cure for Alicia. Resources for the Reaper Group. Potential Allies in the war. Answers to some questions I have... these will be my goals for this journey." He looked at Ater, who nodded with satisfaction.

"You need to inform me of all the details—down to the letter—but right now, there's something else on my mind."

"What is it, Master?" As Ater asked this question, his eyes lighting up a little in curiosity. Esme also looked at Rey, whose calm and stoic gaze reflected nothing as he parted his lips to speak.

"Should I go alone?"