

R Cultivator 396

Chapter 396: Haunted Village

Tyler and Mana now stood beside a humble hut at the edge of a village. But this wasn't just any scene—they were witnessing a memory steeped in pain and fury.

The hut was surrounded by a crowd of angry villagers. Faces twisted with rage. Hands gripped rocks, torches, and farming tools. The air was thick with shouts and accusations.

Inside the hut, the Clown's parents clung to each other, sobbing, pleading with the mob.

"We didn't do anything! We're innocent!" the mother screamed, her voice cracking.

"Please! We didn't kill anyone " the father cried, arms outstretched.

But the villagers were deaf to their desperation.

"Because of your family, so many have died!"

"What kind of monsters raise children like that?!"

"Devil family! Devil family!"

"Burn them! Burn the Devil family!"

Rocks were hurled, striking the door and walls. The fragile wooden frame of the hut groaned under the assault. Someone from the crowd suddenly flung a torch.

The flame arced through the air—and then the thatched roof caught.

Within seconds, the entire hut was engulfed in fire. Smoke curled into the sky, black and suffocating. Screams erupted from inside—raw, desperate, human. The mother's voice faded into a choking rasp, the father's into a wail. But no one moved to help. No one tried to stop the fire. The villagers just watched.

Some even cheered.

Far from the hut, hidden behind a row of trees near a ridge, two small figures watched in silence.

The younger boy sobbed uncontrollably, his tiny fists pressed against his mouth.

The older boy — the one they would one day call the Clown — held him tightly, his thin arms shaking. Tears streamed down his face as well, but a twisted smile curled on his lips. He wasn't smiling because he was happy.

He was smiling because everything had unfolded just as he had foreseen.

And now he knew the truth: his vision of the future worked.

Tyler narrowed his eyes. "He saw this coming. He had a vision."

"He let it happen..." Mana whispered, her voice hollow. "He let his parents die just to test if the future could be changed."

"He wanted to see if it was real," Tyler muttered. "And when it was, he chose to watch instead of warn them."

Yes, the Clown had a vision in which he and his entire family would burn. But instead of warning his parents, he took his brother and left, hiding at a distance to watch and see if the vision would come true.

The memory faded briefly before resuming.

The villagers believed the Undertaker family had been wiped out that day. They buried the ashes. Whispered prayers. Set up warning signs and wards. And for a brief moment, they thought the nightmare was over.

But the deaths didn't stop.

In fact, they increased.

Where once someone died every week, now a death occurred every three days. Strange, sudden, and inexplicable.

An old farmer tripped and cracked his skull on a rock. A young woman bled out from a wild boar attack in broad daylight. A fisherman drowned in the shallows, his legs tangled in invisible vines.

Whispers spread like wildfire: the Undertaker's cursed children had returned as spirits. Many even claimed that they saw the undertaker children running around in the village during night.

So the villagers summoned a priest from a neighboring province—a man known for driving out evil spirits and performing powerful cleansing rituals. Though he is not an immortal Practitioner. He arrived with sacred scripts and tools, confident and composed.

He examined the land, walked the graveyards, and declared the village tainted with resentment.

"The souls of the Undertaker family linger here," he said. "This land is cursed with the weight of injustice."

He promised to create talismans, powerful ones, to protect the homes.

But the next morning, he was found hanging on the metal jackfruit tree. A talisman was nailed to his chest, defiled with blood.

That incident broke the village's spirit.

Panic swept through the homes. Many packed their bags and left immediately. Others lingered, trapped by poverty or pride. But all knew: they were no longer safe.

And watching it all were Tyler and Mana, silent observers within the Clown's haunting memory.

"After his parents died, the Clown took revenge on the entire village," Mana whispered.

"But is it really revenge?" Tyler wondered.

The scenery shifted once more.

They saw the Clown and his younger brother, now slightly older, hidden near the village outskirts, watching as more people died by their hands.

But eventually... the Clown grew bored.

The thrill of killing villagers wore off. The fire inside him didn't burn as brightly anymore.

So, he left.

He took his brother and slipped away from the ruined village in the dead of night. The two of them snuck onto a cargo wagon, then a traveling caravan, and eventually—onto a ship.

A pirate ship.

"The only reason he escaped that day," Tyler muttered, "was because of his vision. He saw the fire, saw his death... and avoided it."

"He didn't tell his parents. He just left them to burn," Mana said, her voice laced with disgust.

"He was curious," Tyler replied, his tone flat. "He wanted to know if fate was fixed—or if it could be changed. When he saw that he could shape it, it twisted him further."

The two siblings huddled together on the deck of the pirate ship. The Clown was staring at the horizon, wind in his messy hair, eyes unreadable. The younger brother was sleeping beside him, clinging to his arm.

And so began a new Chapter in their lives.

No longer sons of an undertaker.

Now drifters in a world.

Eventually, the two boys were discovered hiding aboard the pirate ship. Surprisingly, the pirates didn't throw them overboard. Instead, they kept the children as laborers. The Clown and his younger brother toiled day and night—cleaning decks, hauling supplies, and scrubbing the filth from the ship—for nothing more than scraps of food and a place to sleep on the cold wooden floor.

Despite the harsh conditions, the pirate ship became the first real gateway for them into the world of cultivation. Some of the crew practiced low-level martial and mystical arts, and in their off-hours, the curious brothers would spy on training sessions. Occasionally, a pirate would be drunk enough—or kind enough—to show them a few techniques or explain concepts about Aura resonance and Prana Methods.

Years passed.

By the time the Clown and his brother reached adolescence, they had already long since left the pirate ship. The decision wasn't random. The Clown had another one of his strange visions—a prophetic dream where the very same pirate ship they'd called home was annihilated by a Federation battleship.

Trusting his vision, he convinced his brother to flee with him, and only days after their escape, the vision came true. The ship was sunk in a devastating encounter. Not a single crew member survived.

Afterward, the brothers settled on some group of modest islands. There, they lived simple lives. The Clown—ironically—became a real clown, working at a local traveling circus.

Though many laughed at his act, no one knew the man behind the makeup was learning more than just juggling and tricks. In his spare time, he began studying arrays, obsessing over their mechanics and intricacies with a kind of manic devotion.

His brother, on the other hand, followed a different path. Gifted in immortal Practice, he quickly rose in strength and became a sought-after bodyguard. His current job involved protecting a noble young lady—an aloof but graceful girl with a mysterious background.

One day, the brother introduced her to the Clown. He had fallen for her and claimed to be in love. But there was a problem—her father, a strict and powerful nobleman, forbade their relationship. Desperate and determined, the brother turned to the Clown for help.

The Clown knew someone. A shady alchemist known for forging false identities and smuggling people off the island under the noses of the authorities. The man was planning to leave the island soon, so the Clown arranged everything. He, his brother, and the young noble lady escaped together with the help of the alchemist.

"That guy was Dr. Juggler," Tyler muttered as he watched the memory unfold. "... probably changed his name into Juggler later."

The escape was swift and quiet. With the help of Dr. Juggler, the shady alchemist, the trio boarded a smuggling vessel under the cover of darkness. Dr. Juggler is also traveling in the same ship.

It wasn't a grand ship by any means—old, creaky, and reeking of alchemical fumes—but it served its purpose. As the ship sailed away from the island, leaving the noble family and its threats behind, a strange sense of freedom filled the air.

Inside one of the cramped cabins, the Clown's younger brother and the young miss finally let down their guard. The adrenaline of escape, the thrill of defying a powerful father, and the sheer relief of being together had boiled into something more.

Their lips met in a heated kiss, their hands trembling with emotion and hunger. The small bed creaked under their shifting bodies as they gave in to the intimacy.

Moans resonated.

Unbeknownst to the couple, a small toy clown sat innocently on a dusty shelf in the corner of the room. Its painted smile was faded, one glassy eye chipped.

Except... the eyes were not lifeless.

Behind those beady glass eyes,

someone is watching.

Chapter 397: Beginning of the Circus

The Clown had activated one of his earliest inventions—a vision relay array embedded within the eyes of a seemingly harmless toy clown.

From the safety of his own cabin, he could observe everything happening in the room across the narrow corridor of the ship.

Laughter and muffled moans seeped through the paper-thin wooden walls, but he didn't need to rely on his ears. Through those glassy artificial eyes, he saw everything.

His younger brother and the young miss lay tangled together on the modest cot. The girl's delicate fingers clutched at the sheets, her breath ragged as her body trembled beneath the touch of the man she had defied her family for.

The Clown's brother, usually reserved and composed, now wore a look of pure affection and passion as he whispered into her ear, comforting and claiming her.

The Clown watched it all with an unsettling stillness. His pale face showed no emotion—expressionless, as though it were carved from wax. Yet in the depths of his dark, unblinking eyes, a strange glimmer flickered. It wasn't rage. It wasn't sorrow. It was something else.

Something twisted.

Something possessive.

"Whatever belongs to my brother," he whispered, voice like wind passing through hollow wood, "belongs to me too."

Beside him sat a small wooden box, carved with strange runes and lined with velvet. He opened it slowly, reverently. Inside were several vials filled with glowing, alchemical liquid—each shimmering with a different hue.

The aroma rising from them was pungent, sour, yet oddly enticing. He had purchased these from the shady alchemist Dr. Juggler.

The Clown picked up one vial, twirling it between his long fingers, and muttered, "Hmmm... Let's ask my brother first."

At that moment, Tyler and Mana, who were observing the memory through the diary, felt the scenery around them shift like a dream dissolving into another. The world blurred and reshaped itself.

It was nighttime now.

A torrential downpour hammered the ship's deck, and flashes of lightning danced over the churning sea like restless spirits. Thunder cracked the sky open as if the heavens were warning of something dreadful. The silhouette of other ships flickered in and out of view amid the storm clouds, their sails shredded and bodies ominously still.

Inside a cramped, dimly lit room, chaos of another kind unfolded.

The young miss stood upright, her face flushed with fury and disbelief. Her voice trembled as she screamed at the Clown, whose eerie calm only infuriated her more.

"You're insane! How could you even suggest something like this? I trusted your brother—I followed him here—and now you want to sleep with you?!"

The Clown didn't react to her words. He simply turned toward his brother with a faint, expectant smile. His brother, caught between conflict and devotion, stood silent for several seconds. Then he nodded.

"I understand, brother," he said flatly, then turned and walked out of the room.

The door shut behind him with a hollow thud.

The young miss stood frozen, her eyes wide, her breath hitching in her throat. Her heart shattered not from fear, but betrayal. She had believed in love. She had believed in him.

Now, she was nothing more than a bargaining chip in a strange sibling bond.

"NO! You're monsters!" she screamed, pounding on the door. "You lied to me! How could you do this to me."

There was no response.

Soon, the Clown approached her with two of the alchemist's vials in hand. His smile didn't fade. "I will be gentle," he said softly, before forcing the liquid past her lips.

As the concoction slid down her throat, she coughed and gagged. Something inside her began to shift—emotionally, mentally, physically. Her limbs weakened. Her anger dulled, then blurred. Regret settled into her chest like a cold weight.

She had given up everything for love: a luxurious life, a powerful father, comfort, and status.

And now, she had become a sex toy for a crazy siblings.

Hours later, she lay on the same bed, eyes glazed and body numb. The Clown sat beside her, calmly peeling a fruit with a curved blade. He fed her each slice with gentle hands, as if nothing had happened.

"Don't worry," he said, almost sweetly, "This is also a form of love. Haah..."

But even as he spoke, his head suddenly ached. A burning sensation shot through his skull, and with it, a vision of the future emerged—one so vivid, he gasped aloud.

In the vision, the young miss stood over him, with indifferent gaze in her eyes. In her hands was the same knife—now plunged deep into his chest.

He clutched his temples, reeling.

Meanwhile, the girl, regaining a flicker of strength, noticed the knife lying within reach. For a fleeting moment, her fingers inched toward it. The image of stabbing the Clown—of ending her nightmare—danced in her mind.

But she stopped.

She was too weak. Too confused.

The Clown's vision faded, and he exhaled. His gaze shifted to her—calm, but sharp. The girl flinched, sensing something unnatural in his stare. For a split second, she saw the glimmer of killing intent. Then it was gone.

Was it her imagination?

The Clown had indeed considered killing her. If she would be a threat to his life, it would be logical. But then he remembered something important.

She was his brother's favorite.

If he killed her, his brother will be upset . So instead of following the path the vision had shown, he made a new decision:

He would change the future.

Once again he laid top of the young miss. The young miss closed her eyes without any resistance.

One year later,

The young miss name is Amber, she awoke in a modest, cozy room. She was no longer chained by fear, nor weakened by potions. She had adjusted. Grown numb, perhaps. Or... maybe something deeper had happened.

Lying on either side of her were the two brothers. The Clown, once eerie and bizarre, had changed. He no longer wore his circus costume. He didn't paint his face or whisper strange things to himself. He had reinvented himself—become calmer, more stable, even charming.

He had become a better man.

And strangely... he had fallen in love with her too.

Whether it was real love or an obsession in disguise, no one could tell.

Not even him.

But for now, the three of them remained together.

And the Clown's haunting smile was replaced—if only for a moment—by something human.

Amber gazed at the two men lying beside her, their faces bathed in the morning sunlight. A soft smile touched her lips. She never imagined her life would take such a turn—married to two brothers, both of whom had once been complete strangers. Now, they were her world.

They had protected her, cherished her, even fought for her. Though the elder brother had been harsh and unrelenting at first, something within him had softened. Over time, the man once known as the Clown had cast off his mask—both literal and metaphorical. He had changed, tamed by love or perhaps haunted by guilt.

Amber leaned forward and kissed them both on the cheeks. "Wake up, my husbands," she whispered. She felt happy, content, even blessed.

But Tyler and Mana—watching the memory unfold through a distorted vision—twitched with discomfort.

The scene shifted.

The younger brother had fallen gravely ill. Desperate to save him, the elder brother summoned countless doctors and healers, but none could offer a cure. Each one spoke nonsense — like his brother is already dead.

Soon, the younger brother's condition worsened. His skin blackened, his flesh decayed, and eventually, all that remained was a pile of bones. The older brother collapsed in tears, and only then did the memories come rushing back.

That night on the ship while escaping.

His brother had refused to share Amber. He had been firm, even slapping the Clown across the face. That rejection sparked something terrible. While laughing, the Clown had stabbed his brother in the throat.

Then, in a haze of madness, he turned to Amber. In front of his brother's still body, he forced himself upon her. He fed her some shady potions and did everything.

When he was having headache and future vision, Amber reached for the fruit knife—only to stab herself in the chest.

Yet, in the Clown's twisted perception, neither of them died and his brother allowed him to enjoy Amber.

Detached from reality, he engraved Freshness Preserving Arrays into both bodies. In his delusion, he continued to speak to them, eat with them, sleep beside them—as if nothing had happened. To him, they were still alive. He even maintained Amber's array subconsciously, recharging it during moments of twisted intimacy. In short, it recharged subconsciously while having sexual intercourse with Amber's body.

But he never touched his brother's array.

A year passed. Slowly, the preservation magic on his brother's corpse began to falter. The body decayed, bones blackened. Still, the Clown refused to accept the truth. He believed it was a disease or some kind of curse. In his madness, he summoned more doctors and so-called curse specialists. Those who dared tell the truth met their end at his hands.

Only the Shady Alchemist survived—spinning lies to protect himself from the deranged Clown.

Eventually, as the full weight of memory returned, the Clown broke again. That mad smile—the one stained with both joy and sorrow—twisted across his face. Standing before the grave, he watched the pyre burn his brother's remains. He took a handful of ashes and smeared them across his own face like war paint.

He turned to Amber's motionless body—still flawless, still beautiful.

"Let's go, Amber," he whispered, gently lifting her in his arms. "Let's build a circus and have fun. Maybe... if I can find Eternity, I might be able to bring our brother back."

The Shady Alchemist, watching from a distance, hesitated. Then, with a sigh, he followed the Clown into the unknown.

And that day, a new pirate crew was born.

They called themselves The Circus.

Chapter 398: Circus vs White Pearl (1/2)

The White Pearl lingered quietly at the edge of the Pink Mist, far enough to avoid drawing attention, but close enough to keep watch. Its Stealth Array was fully activated—not to make the ship invisible, but to mask it from radars, magical sensors, and even Divine Sense. In a sea crawling with threats, sometimes silence and stillness were more powerful than brute force.

Inside the CIC room, Lily sat in the captain's chair, eyes locked on the translucent projection panels floating before her. She looked calm on the outside, but her mind was a storm of calculations.

Mathilda, leaning against the console with arms crossed, raised an eyebrow. "So... are we going in again?"

Lily didn't answer right away. Her finger tapped rhythmically against the armrest. Eventually, she shook her head. "No. Tyler said he could handle it. If things get too tricky, he assured me he could escape without issue."

Mathilda tilted her head. "Then should we sail to the Level 3 Fishery like we planned? Let the slaves start working?"

Lily sighed and turned in her seat, flipping a card between her fingers—the Seven of Diamonds. "No... If my guess is right, that Twin-Headed Sea Serpent we encountered wasn't just some random sea beast. It was his pet. That Clown."

"The one from earlier?" Mathilda frowned.

"Exactly. Remember how the serpent didn't attack when we had this card on display? It only turned hostile after the Clown turned on us. He must've sensed we killed it... and now, he might be coming for revenge." Lily said as she showed the Seven of Diamonds card.

Mathilda blinked. "Huh... Wait, then shouldn't we run?"

Lily smiled faintly, but there was no amusement in it. "True. But I don't think we can escape him—not easily. He's not just crazy. He's clever."

She gestured toward one of the projection panels, zooming in on the nearby sea. What came into view wasn't a ship or sea monster—but a small, colorful box bobbing on the waves.

Then another.

And another.

Dozens of them began appearing, scattered like confetti over the ocean's surface.

Mathilda narrowed her eyes. "What... the heck are those?"

The colorful boxes floated on the waves unnaturally, like they were weightless. No matter how the current shifted, they stayed clustered together. And then—click.

A crank on the side of one of the boxes began to turn.

Clink. Clink. Clink-clink-clink.

A haunting little melody began to play, soft and nostalgic, like the lullaby of a forgotten child's toy. All across the sea, the other boxes followed, their cranks turning in eerie harmony.

Lily stood abruptly. Her face turned grim. "Oh no... That Clown's smarter than I thought."

"What does it mean?" Mathilda asked, stepping closer to the panel.

Suddenly, the music boxes burst open.

Each box revealed a spring-loaded Jack-in-the-Box. But instead of cheerful faces, each one wore a cracked porcelain mask with a painted grin and glowing red eyes. Their mouths opened wide as a chorus of mad laughter echoed across the sea.

"He found us," Lily said flatly.

"H-how? How did he—?"

"He used the Sound." Lily turned to Mathilda, her voice quick but steady. "Those boxes are more than they seem. He used sound waves to scan the area—like bats. You know how bats don't rely on sight, right? They emit high-pitched sounds and listen for the echoes to build a 'sound image.' It's called echolocation."

Mathilda's mouth fell open.

Lily continued, "He did the same. Amplified music mixed with arrays. He scattered the boxes across the ocean, letting the sound waves bounce off ships or barriers. And our ship—hidden by stealth—would distort the sound pattern. That's how he pinpointed us. Crazy method... but the Clown is crazy."

As if on cue, a voice echoed across the sea, louder than the laughter.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

The sound was thunderous—distorted, insane, and oddly theatrical. The surface of the water parted slightly, pushed aside by an incoming ship. But this was no ordinary vessel.

A monstrosity of patchwork wood and metal emerged from the fog, painted in chaotic streaks of red, blue, and yellow. Balloons floated from the railings. Banners flapped in the wind, each emblazoned with grotesque caricatures of smiling faces. Cannons jutted from the hull, but some were shaped like horns and confetti launchers.

At the top of the mast was their Jolly Roger—a skull with a permanent grin stretched ear to ear, topped with a clown's hat.

Lily's fingers tapped the table. "The Circus is here..."

Mathilda exhaled slowly, "That's a whole damn haunted carnival on water."

The sea around the White Pearl began to shift. The Jack-in-the-boxes started to vibrate, some releasing bursts of confetti, others producing thick plumes of colorful smoke. The Clown's ship didn't even seem to slow as it plowed through the chaos, forcing a wave to wash over the smaller toys like they were part of its grand entrance.

"Huh... Just to be sure... Do you guys have awareness that we are under attack?" Serena appeared as projection and said.

"Yeah.. yeah... We know..." Lily just nodded.

Meanwhile, deep inside the eerie silence of the Circus's fourth floor, Tyler and Mana gently closed the old leather-bound diary.

"Okay..." Tyler sat on the bed and exhaled. "That was one hell of a ride."

Mana floated in mid-air beside him, her usually bright face now shadowed with discomfort. "after that The Ring Master joined the Clown... and then they formed the Circus together. And the alchemist too." She recalled "The circus is a crazy Pirate group. But nothing is crazier than what the Clown did for his family."

Tyler reached over and gently patted her head. "Yeah. Twisted or not, he had no reasons, only madness. But at least we found one of his weaknesses." He smiled, though there was little humor behind it.

A few moments passed in thoughtful silence before Tyler rose to his feet. "Come on. Let's continue planting Charms."

They exited the Clown's room, stepping into the narrow corridor that led toward the lower levels. Eventually, they reached a large archway and passed through. Tyler emerged into the Game Arena—a massive chamber bathed in soft blue light. Unlike the heavily guarded third floor, the fourth was quiet and mostly unguarded when no show was scheduled.

"Let's take another route," Tyler muttered, sensing unease in the air.

Mana nodded without hesitation.

But just as they began moving, something shot through the air like a blue streak of lightning.

Flash!

The blur collided directly with Tyler and Mana. It phased through Mana , But Tyler –

CRACK!

Tyler shattered into a thousand glittering shards of ice.

Mana gasped—but before she could react further, the real Tyler reappeared behind her. He had used his Ice Escape Art, creating a decoy just in time.

They both turned to look at the blue blur, which now hovered ahead of them, growling softly.

"A lion...?" Mana whispered.

"It's the Ring Master's pet, That small lion he always carries." Tyler muttered.

Before he could form another strategy, a huge tail swung from the side—BOOM!

The impact sent Tyler flying into the arena's center.

CRASH!

He hit the platform hard and shattered into ice once again.

The real Tyler reappeared near the scattered ice, brushing dust from his shoulder. "Seriously? Can I get a break, bro?"

A slow clap echoed from the shadows above.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

"Well done... applause for the Ice Trickster." A tall figure stepped into the spotlight, dressed in an extravagant ringmaster outfit of deep crimson and gold, complete with a half-mask and feathered top hat. His long coattails fluttered behind him like a cape.

"Ring Master." Tyler narrowed his eyes. "I thought there were no events scheduled in the Game Arena today."

"Ah, yes." The Ring Master grinned as he descended the stairs toward the arena's floor. "Normally, you'd be right. But you see... you're the show tonight. And I'm terribly short on time, so I thought I'd cut the trailers and skip straight to the finale."

He clapped his hands once.

CLANK!

Immediately, thick metal walls slammed shut over the exits, sealing the arena entirely. Tyler reacted quickly, launching himself into the air—but was stopped mid-flight by an invisible ceiling.

"Of course there's a barrier..." he muttered as he rubbed his temple.

Then the metal floor beneath him shifted, slowly pulling back like a retractable lid. A vast tank of deep water rose beneath the platform, glowing faintly with magic. And in that water... dozens of creatures swam with terrifying grace.

They looked like sharks—if sharks were fused with piranhas and had scales like steel. Each one was the size of a cart, their serrated fins cutting through the water as they circled hungrily.

The Ring Master chuckled.

"Beautiful, aren't they? These are all wonderful creatures I found in deep sea. I call them my Screaming Snappers. They bite, spin, and shriek." He paused, licking his lips.

Tyler peered into the tank and raised an eyebrow.

The Ring Master chuckled again. "Speaking of mana... where's your adorable little fox? That pet of yours..."

His expression darkened.

"I do hope she's not dead. She would've made a lovely addition to my tamed collection. I hope my captain won't kill her too."

Tyler's gaze sharpened, but he didn't respond.

The Ring Master then said, "Oh, and speaking of captain, he has already gone after your crew. Such a sweet group of friends you have. Wonder how long they'll last... HAHAAAAH!"

Tyler didn't blink. He looked down at the water, watching the movement of the creatures. Despite the Ring Master's taunts, his smirk widened, "Seriously? Out of all those Arenas, you chose water against me?"

Chapter 399: Circus vs White Pearl (2/2)

In the sea...

The Clown stood at the bow of his flamboyantly decorated ship—a chaotic mess of rainbow stripes, oversized gears, and grinning puppets hanging from the sails. Arms spread wide, coat flapping in the salty wind, he stood like a performer before his final act. His mismatched eye lenses, one yellow and the other a cracked glass orb, scanned the horizon with eerie precision.

Then he got a feedback from all the Jack-in-the-boxes in the sea, a barely-there outline of a ship cloaked in concealment array, fighting to remain unseen.

His cracked smile widened.

"F.O.U.N.D youuuuuuuu," he whispered, dragging the word out like a twisted melody.

In response, the Jack-in-the-boxes surrounding him burst into cackling laughter, their spring-loaded heads bobbing wildly in agreement.

"Mode Shadow?" Mathilda asked from the deck of the White Pearl, her eyes locked on the incoming ship.

"Nope. Let's not waste that just yet," Lily replied, already moving toward the helm. "We still have the 'Waypoint Emergency Escape.' And since this is just the White Pearl, we don't need to reveal our another identity. Yet."

Mathilda glanced at her, then at the approaching madness in the sea. "So... How do we escape from this personal visit of that lunatic?"

Lily sighed and stepped onto the main deck, raising her voice loud enough to be heard across the water. "What do we owe the pleasure, Clown?"

The Clown didn't hesitate. He tilted his head, a maniacal glint in his eyes, and spoke while bouncing in place, "You have the remnant aura of my Pinkie. You... you're the one who killed it?"

"Pinkie?" Lily asked, confused.

"That was our pirate crew's pet," replied the Juggler, his expression solemn. "The twin-headed sea serpent."

"Oh... that." Lily shrugged. "It attacked us. So we attacked back."

The Clown burst into laughter again, louder this time, and whipped out a strange-looking device from his belt. It was shaped like a gun, but unfortunately, it looked disturbingly like something else.

"Eww... Is that supposed to be a p—" Lily started, her face contorted in disgust.

"No!" the Clown interrupted defensively. "Even a mushroom can look like that if you squint!"

Mathilda returned from the lower deck, where she had been issuing orders. She stopped mid-step. "Eww, is that what I think it is? Does it impreg—"

"Can we not call it that?" the Clown groaned. "It's my new invention! And no, it doesn't impregnate anything. It doesn't shoot white liquid either!"

He waved the device in the air like a trophy, clearly proud—and equally oblivious.

"That alone shouldn't be legal," Mathilda muttered, squinting. "Thankfully we don't have kids on board."

Lily narrowed her eyes. She sensed it now. The Clown was more eager to talk than fight. His mental state was fractured, scattered like glass. She could use that.

"Look," Lily said, pointing at the weapon. "Even if it's a laser gun or whatever... showing it to everyone, That's just public indecency."

"N-no."

"Why did you have to make it veiny?" Lily asked.

"Eww... " Mathilda said that.

"They're wires!" the Clown snapped, nearly whining.

"Why does it have... balls?" Mathilda asked, horrified.

"Eww..." This time the Juggler said that, he got glared by his captain in return.

"Those are ammo sacs!" the Clown defended. "With fur."

"Why fur?!" Lily asked, genuinely disturbed.

"It's... trendy..." the Clown replied quietly.

"Eww," muttered one of the Jack-in-the-boxes.

"I heard it was trendy!" the Clown shouted.

"On a jacket, not on a pe—"

"STOP. Saying. That. Word!" The Clown snapped, then held out the weapon. "Here! Just take it! It's a good invention!"

"I'm not touching that," Lily said flatly.

She summoned her whip with a flick of her hand and caught the weapon midair, then expertly flung it back like a frisbee. The Clown caught it reflexively... then looked at it with sudden loathing.

Though Lily's whip destroyed from previous battle. She already made many copies with the Copper Pot.

The Clown looked dejected. He dropped it on the ground and stomped on it.

"Aaann..." A unified groan echoed across both ships. Every man instinctively shielded their crotch. Even the Clown winced.

"W-wait a minute," he muttered, eyes widening. "You sneaky rascal... I came here to avenge my serpent, not destroy my other snake!"

He turned and glared at the White Pearl, his clownish bravado temporarily deflated.

The Juggler exhaled, grateful. It wasn't that he didn't notice the nonsense... it's just that he didn't dare interrupt the Clown's babbling. Few who did lived to tell the tale.

Meanwhile, Tuman walked up to Lily and Mathilda.

"We're all set," he said calmly.

Lily gave a sharp nod. "Attack."

At her command, the runes on the side of the White Pearl lit up. Several large, rune-engraved canons slid out from hidden compartments along the hull.

With a loud FWOOSH, torrents of water, pressurized to extreme force by array cores, exploded from the barrels, blasting toward the Circus Ship in spiraling arcs.

The Clown's eyes widened, then narrowed in glee.

"Oh-hoho! So it's gonna be that kind of party!"

He snapped his fingers, and several flying drones in the shape of toy monkeys launched into the air, flinging confetti bombs in all directions. Behind him, the crew scrambled as they prepared the defense.

The White Pearl rocked slightly as it prepared for another volley.

"Mathilda, prepare to escape." Lily ordered, "Tuman attack again."

Meanwhile, inside the Circus' Game Arena...

Tyler hovered silently above the massive tank of water. The liquid below, once clear, was now completely dyed crimson. Blood swirled like ink in a painter's palette, yet none of it clung to Tyler. His clothes and body were spotless—as if the violence that just occurred had never touched him.

Across the arena, the Ring Master clapped slowly, his pale hands echoing through the cold metal chamber. "Impressive. I didn't expect you to have such... aptitude in water. You were almost invincible in the water."

With another clap, the tank beneath Tyler shuddered. Metal plates slid over the arena floor, covering the tank and then it removed again replacing it with a dry platform. The noise of shifting gears was deafening.

When the floor finally settled, a new horror emerged—dozens of slaves stood below, shackled and bruised, their eyes filled with dread and exhaustion. Men, women, even children. The metallic scent of blood was replaced by the foul air of fear.

"This time," the Ring Master announced with a twisted grin, "let's play a more entertaining game."

He extended his hand toward the hovering duo.

"These people below you? They are desperate. Hollow. Ready to do anything for a sliver of hope." He gestured upward. "I will now give two keys. These keys can unlock their collars—and grant freedom. However... each key only works once. Only two lives can be saved."

Two glowing orbs materialized between Tyler and Mana, each containing a shining silver key. The light from the keys reflected in the eyes of the slaves below like the gleam of a dying star.

Tyler's sharp gaze analyzed the orbs. "They're rigged," he muttered to Mana. "Self-destruct mechanisms after single use."

Mana nodded.

The Ring Master's voice boomed again, now filled with perverse excitement. "Now, my dear slaves, go ahead. Beg them. Bargain with them. Kill them if you must. Do anything it takes. This is your chance to reclaim your freedom."

A few heartbeats of silence followed. Then the chaos began.

One man stumbled forward, kneeling on the ground. "Please! Just save my daughter. She's only eight... you don't understand how horrible it is for a girl to grow up in slavery!"

Another voice snarled, "Shut up, daughtercon! You think your brat's life is more important than mine? I've been here for ten years! Help me instead!"

"No! Save me! I'm pregnant—"

"Save my brother! He's just a boy!"

The desperation took over. Voices rose like waves in a storm, each plea more desperate than the last. The slaves began shoving, yelling, arguing. The line between pleading and fighting started to blur.

Tyler hovered silently. His expression was unreadable.

After a long pause, he finally spoke, his voice calm and cold.

"I'll think about it. Give me some time."

The slaves froze. Their eyes shifted toward one another with mistrust. Nobody dared to move. Nobody wanted to seem too eager—or too weak.

Above them, the Ring Master narrowed his eyes.

Tyler pulled something from his coat—a palm-sized house. With a flick of his wrist, Tyler tossed it downward.

It hit the ground and expanded in a flash of light, unfolding and growing into a small house. In mere seconds, a cozy, fully furnished structure stood in the middle of the arena floor, its glowing arrays still humming softly.

Tyler and Mana landed silently and walked inside without a word.

The Ring Master blinked, momentarily speechless. He tried to peer into the house with his divine sense—but it was blocked. He couldn't see inside.

"Hmph... so he's stalling?" he muttered. "Trying to buy time? Or maybe planning something?"

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat. Unlike the Clown, who acted with manic impulsiveness, the Ring Master prided himself on patience.

In his eyes, Tyler's fate was already sealed the moment the Clown targeted him.

Chapter 400: 400. Tyler White vs Ring Master

After a few tense minutes, the atmosphere in the Game arena grew heavy with unease. The slaves, bound by desperation and fear, shifted nervously, their patience fraying by the second.

Watching from above, the Ring Master smirked.

"Alright then... let's make things more interesting," he said with a theatrical wave of his hand.

A tall incense stick materialized in the center of the arena, its tip burning with a soft orange glow. The scent that wafted from it was strangely calming, almost sweet, but the effect on the slaves was the opposite. Panic spread through the crowd like wildfire.

"This incense," the Ring Master announced, "marks your countdown. When it burns out, anyone still wearing a collar will self-detonate. Beautiful, isn't it? A race against time—with your lives on the line."

The calm broke. Panic exploded.

The slaves screamed and surged forward, many directing their fury at the modest house Tyler had conjured earlier. Though it was reinforced with concealment arrays and mild protective runes, it was never meant to withstand an all-out assault. These weren't ordinary slaves—several were Master-level cultivators, and a few even radiated the deadly aura of Grandmasters.

In a matter of seconds, the structure crumbled under the onslaught, its walls and enchantments disintegrating in a burst of smoke and fractured light.

From the rubble, Tyler emerged unscathed, dusting off his clothes. Mana was nowhere in sight.

The crowd paused, stunned that he had walked out so calmly. Tyler's expression remained unreadable, his posture radiating quiet confidence.

"So, Tyler White," the Ring Master called from above. "Have you made your choice?"

Tyler didn't answer immediately. He stepped forward slowly, and the slaves instinctively backed away—just one step. But then they froze, realizing there was nowhere to run and no more time to waste.

A small voice broke the tension.

"Please... can I have the key?" a little girl asked, stepping out from the crowd. Her eyes were wide with fear, but she stood tall.

Tyler smiled. Without hesitation, he tossed a glowing silver key to her.

The crowd gasped.

The girl caught the key with trembling hands, staring at it in disbelief. Her father rushed to shield her, eyes darting toward the others.

"What kind of twisted game is this?" the Ring Master muttered, unimpressed. "Stoking their hope just to see them tear each other apart?"

But before anyone could act, a shadow loomed over the girl—a Grandmaster-level slave had appeared behind her, hand outstretched.

"Give me the key," he growled.

In an instant, his arm froze solid, encased in thick, shimmering ice.

"Wait," Tyler said calmly, tossing another key toward the man. The ice shattered just as the Grandmaster caught the key mid-air, eyes wide with confusion.

"...W-what?" he stammered.

Another slave stepped forward, desperation overtaking caution. "I want one too!"

But there are only two keys. He can't possibly fight the Grandmaster, so he decided to snatch it from the little girl.

But ,

To the shock of everyone, Tyler casually threw a third key.

The arena fell into stunned silence.

Now there were three keys—when the Ring Master had only provided two.

The three recipients hesitated no longer. The father unlocked his daughter's collar. The Grandmaster and the third man unlocked their own. With a trio of sharp metallic clangs, the collars dropped to the ground like broken shackles.

Tears welled in the Grandmaster's eyes. "It's... it's real. I wasn't hallucinating."

"Thank you... Thank you!" he cried, falling to his knees before Tyler. The father, daughter, and the other man quickly followed suit.

"Can my father get a key too?" the little girl asked, her voice innocent and hopeful.

Tyler didn't even blink. He tossed a fourth key.

Up above, the Ring Master stood frozen, eyes wide. "Impossible... He replicated the keys? But how? Each one should require intricate formations, binding arrays, and—he didn't have time..."

"Please! Help me too!"

"I've been here for years, I'll do anything!"

One after another, the slaves dropped to their knees, pleading—not with desperation, but with hope. Hope that was now real, tangible, and shining in silver light.

Tyler raised a hand, and dozens of keys materialized in the air like a cascade of falling stars. He waved, and they scattered across the arena, landing before slave after slave.

The sound of unlocking collars echoed through the arena like a symphony of freedom.

"Is he... really just a merchant?" the Ring Master muttered, clenching his fists. "What is this man?"

As if hearing him, Tyler looked up. His gaze met the Ring Master's directly.

"Looks like everyone's free now," Tyler said coolly.

The Ring Master forced a grin, though his jaw clenched tight. "Well done. I must admit... that was entertaining. But enough games. It's time for Round Three. No tricks. No mercy. Just carnage."

He clapped his hands once more.

The arena floor rumbled violently. This time, no metal plates descended. Instead, a massive cave burst forth from the earth, forming a jagged maw of darkness.

From within came growls and roars.

GROWL.

ROOOOAR.

Creatures poured out from the shadows—massive Iron Bears with glowing red eyes, Steel Hounds with jagged metal teeth, Lava Wolves dripping molten fire from their jaws, Fire Giant Stags whose antlers burned with hellish flame, and even grotesque Poison Tree Frogs whose skin pulsed with venom.

Dozens. Maybe hundreds.

A wave of savage beasts surged toward the newly freed slaves.

"Wow," Tyler muttered, eyes scanning the incoming horde.

But this time, he wasn't alone.

One Grandmaster stepped forward, fire in his eyes. "You gave us freedom. Let me fight."

Others followed. Masters and Elite warriors, no longer shackled, stood before Tyler, ready to fight.

Tyler's smirk returned as the chaos unfolded around him.

"You guys take care of these beasts," he said calmly, tossing a collection of assorted weapons onto the battlefield. The freed slaves didn't hesitate; each one grabbed a weapon, the fire of newfound hope blazing in their eyes.

"I'll handle the Ring Master," Tyler added, his voice steady with confidence. Without waiting, he soared into the air, scales beginning to emerge on his skin, glinting with draconic power.

Mode: Dragon.

"Heh? Handle me? Can you even escape the barrier?" the Ring Master sneered, watching Tyler approach with disdain.

But the smirk on Tyler's face never faded. Just then, the shimmering barrier that had enclosed the Game Arena flickered... and vanished.

From the shadows of the operator room, Mana stepped out, her own grin matching Tyler's. She had been the one to disable the arena's protective barrier. After she and Tyler had entered the temporary house, she'd quietly escaped underground, slipping past the Ring Master unnoticed.

The Ring Master, now caught completely off guard, took the full brunt of Tyler's attack. The impact sent him skidding across the platform as blood spurted from his mouth. However, he was quick to retaliate, activating his Domain.

Whoom!

Rings of searing fire materialized midair, forming a blazing spiral. The ground transformed, warping into a grand stage that mimicked the Game Arena, complete with molten lines and glowing sigils.

"So this is your Domain," Tyler muttered, scanning the fiery battlefield.

A massive chessboard materialized beneath their feet.

Unfazed, Tyler activated his own Domain.

In the Arena, the slaves were locked in an intense struggle against waves of savage beasts. Steel Hounds with glowing red eyes lunged at warriors with terrifying speed. Poisonous Tree Frogs leapt and released toxic gas upon impact. Fire Giant Stags charged through formations, their burning antlers reducing weapons to molten scraps. Iron Bears roared as they swatted opponents like ragdolls.

But the slaves had spirit—and now, weapons. They fought back fiercely.

One of the wolves lunged at the little girl, its jaws wide open and eyes glowing with bloodlust. Her father cried out, but he was too far—too slow to save her.

Just as the beast closed in, a blur flashed past.

The Grandmaster appeared like a storm, placing himself between the child and death. With a single, swift motion, his sword gleamed through the air, cleaving through the wolf mid-leap.

The creature fell, lifeless, before it could even scream.

The little girl stared up at her protector, wide-eyed, as the Grandmaster stood tall, his blade dripping with blood and resolve.

A thunderous growl echoed as the Ring Master Pet appeared — a towering Blue Lion with burning eyes.

At the same time, the Ring Master wielded a staff that emitted a stream of fire like a flamethrower, aiming directly at Tyler.

The Blue Lion lunged.

Tyler met it head-on. With precise timing, he punched the beast mid-leap, then grabbed its fiery beard and spun it around, shoving it directly into the incoming flames.

The lion let out a heart-wrenching roar of pain as it burned. Its eyes, filled with agony, turned toward the Ring Master.

"HA! You think I care about my pet? Just die along with it!" the Ring Master cackled maniacally.

The Rings of Fire surrounding Tyler began to close in like a death trap.

"Tsk... Chariot," Tyler said.

A castle-shaped chess piece, towering like a three-story building, manifested in a flash of blue light. It barreled from the side and crashed directly into the Ring Master, sending him flying once again.

Tyler glanced down at the lion. Its large, majestic form had been reduced to a burned, bald cub, no larger than a housecat. Without hesitation, Tyler scooped it up and stored it in his pocket dimension.

"This Ring Master is weak..." Tyler muttered.

But the truth was more complex.

The Ring Master was not a direct fighter. He was a Beast Tamer, specializing in controlling powerful creatures rather than engaging in combat himself. Most of his beasts, however, were currently occupied—battling the dozens of powerful former slaves in the arena below.

He was also on the verge of breaking into the Divine Seeker Realm, but hadn't yet crossed the threshold.