

S vs Rebirth 341

Chapter 341 Punishment

With a proud smile on his face, Hagen returned and met his father in his office.

He walked right in front of his father and bowed to him. "Father, your son, Hagen, has returned. I've settled all the problems within the fort."

His father didn't buy any of his lies. He simply glanced at his butler and said, "From now on, he can't bear the name of Lawrence and he shall be expelled and thrown into the slum. I never have a son called Hagen."

Upon hearing it, Hagen's face became pale. He was confused, not expecting to receive this treatment, especially after his good work in their fort.

"Fa—" Before he spoke, the Earl had slammed the table and shouted, "You are not my son!"

"What? What is happening? Why did you do this to me?! I've done everything for the fort and yet, you're throwing me like this?!" Obviously, Hagen didn't think he was in the wrong. He never realized that claiming the Demon Banner Army's deeds was one of the greatest mistakes.

"You've done everything you shouldn't have done! It's better if you were never born!" The Earl gritted his teeth, remembering the day when the commander came to extort him.

If he was still as angry as that day, he would've killed this guy on the spot. But because he had promised the commander, he had to make sure everything was done thoroughly.

He took a deep breath and shouted to his butler, "Drag him out of here according to what I've told you before! I don't ever want to see this guy anymore and make sure he can't use Lawrence's name anymore!"

"What? Father, I don't understand why you are doing this to me. I've done everything I can to help you with the fort—!" No matter how much he pleaded, the Earl didn't explain to him while the butler dragged him out and threw him to the knight.

"Let me go!" Hagen kept struggling while two soldiers were pinning him down.

"Are we allowed to do this? Won't our lives be in danger?" One of the soldiers was still hesitating while dragging Hagen to the carriage.

The carriage was driving straight to the slum while the other soldier remained silent because he was focused on restraining Hagen.

Hagen kept cursing them and swore they would kill their families. The other guy was scared while the other maintained his calm.

As soon as they reached the slum area, the calm soldier said, "We've received the order from the lord. From now on, the Young Master is not a part of Lawrence anymore. Although I'm not sure what is happening, I've heard that the commander of the Demon Banner Army has personally come to this place.

"This is just between you and me. According to my friend who went to a merchant that the commander brought to this place, it was said that the young lord had mistreated the people in the fort and asked for the Demon Banner Army's help only to mistreat them and even point his swords at them. And lastly, he claimed their deeds.

"The commander was angry and the Earl had to give him a lot of compensation. I'm not very sure, but back then, there were around fifteen charts of goods... No one knew the extent of the compensation, but it was certainly big for the Earl, considering he was angry for three days and three nights, according to the maid working there."

"What?" The soldier was shocked, Hagen also dropped his jaw, not understanding what was happening.

But the next thing he realized, he had been thrown to the dark alley by the soldiers and said, "Don't blame us, Young Lord. We're only doing our job... Ah right, you're not our Young Lord anymore."

"You—" Hagen wanted to snarl at him but the carriage had driven away. He didn't realize just yet that there were a group of thugs hiding in that darkness.

As soon as the soldiers left, someone's hand covered his mouth as a rough voice echoed in the alley. "Hey, did you hear that? This must be the famous lecherous second lord, right? To think he would be stripped from his title. He is now the same as us!"

"What are—" Hagen tried to struggle to see these people, but there were a few punches landing on his face in that instant, knocking him out.

His consciousness was blank for a few hours before he woke up again in the middle of nowhere. He was surrounded by buildings but it wasn't bright like the town. His body was covered in pain, especially in his jaw.

Because of the temperature, his skin was numb and freezing. In that instant, he realized he was stark naked.

His stomach was soon rumbling as he hadn't eaten anything even before meeting his father, so all the hunger suddenly came. But due to the punches on his stomach that covered his belly with bruises, the moment he touched his stomach, he fell down while growling in pain.

"Aaaaahhh!" Hagen gritted his teeth while looking around, trying to find someone to get help. "Help... I'm the second son of Earl Lawrence. If you help me, I can give you everything."

He kept crying for help, but not a single person came to him. Hagen tried to crawl on the ground, trying to get into the city, but the pain and the cold were making it hard to move. His consciousness had become fuzzy as well due to the hypothermia.

There were only two possibilities for Hagen. If he had a strong mentality, he would try to stand up and find something to eat even if it meant rummaging through the trash. There was a chance that he would be bullied by the people around as well.

And that would put him in greater pain, not knowing whether he would be able to survive or not. After all, he had to suffer from hypothermia due to the lack of clothes, extreme hunger and stomach pain because of the food, and the harsh life of the slum.

The other possibility was him dying due to the cold because no one helped him.

Either way, it was said that Hagen Lawrence was never seen since that day.

Chapter 342 Next Course

After resting for a while, they had finally gotten another assignment along with the reward from the previous mission.

A messenger came to their location, which was the Demon Beholder Group's member.

"You've received a new assignment. Immediately set off to the Silica Valley and receive the complete instruction from the Valley Master."

Paul nodded. "Order received."

"Also, this is your reward from the previous mission." He handed a letter before leaving.

Paul opened it and saw the reward. As expected, they received a quite amount of Gold and Contribution Points. Like Paul announced back then, Rose and Noel received the biggest reward while the others weren't that far off.

Normally, this would be the end of the reward. However, there was an additional reward attached at the bottom of the page along with the message.

'The Zero Squad will receive an additional 4,000 Gold and 120,000 Contribution Points.'

'This reward can be exchanged for various items in the Demon Banner Army Headquarters. The Demon Relief Squad can handle how they distribute it themselves.'

"Mhm? What is this additional reward?" Noel asked.

"It's from extorting that noble," said Paul with a smile. "The commander usually shared thirty percent of the reward with us in the form of money and points since we don't really need all the expensive stuff."

"I see." Noel nodded with a serious expression.

"Are you disappointed that we only get thirty percent?"

"Not really. It's clear that the reason why we could get so much from the noble is from the commander's prestige. In other words, he's the one who contributes the most, so it's already quite good to have him share thirty percent of the reward." Noel explained his thought.

"Indeed. Anyway, we'll be leaving in three hours. All of you are to pack up our stuff and get ready to leave."

"Understood." They nodded and immediately dispersed.

"Noel, Noel..." Anna tugged Noel's sleeve.

"Mhm?" Noel tilted his head in confusion before he remembered what they were about to do. "Do you want to go somewhere? Let's go then."

Anna nodded with a serious expression.

Without hesitation, both of them left and moved somewhere far from the group since they had an important matter to discuss.

After Anna checked their surrounding, she finally sat down and ordered some food.

"This valley is perfect for us to do it."

"That's true. We can easily find some cliffs around the valley." Noel nodded.

"But are you sure we're going to do it?" Anna asked again. Although she had agreed to this plan, she didn't know what would happen to these people. After all, the people around here were so caring. She felt bad deceiving them like this.

Surprisingly, Noel didn't hesitate to give the nod as if he had steeled his resolve. But that resolve turned out to be an arrangement made by the commander. "Yes. Don't worry about them. In fact, I've asked the commander to put me in the same squad using my second identity.

"Know those guys, they'll realize something is up. And after seeing them like this, I don't think someone will snitch on us. Though, I'll just give them my side of the situation, not yours. After all, you're the one dealing with the Royal Family, so if they know about it, it'll become troublesome for you."

Anna contemplated for a moment. It was true that these people would instantly realize Noel was ladre just by looking at his build. And that would dispel their hatred immediately.

In the best case, they would even relate this incident to the reason why she became famous for destroying Noel's family. They would think this was actually the scheme created by their families.

Of course, the timing was important. He couldn't really just appear right after his death because the news couldn't be spread.

Hence, he was planning to train by himself for another month before making his appearance.

"I see. If that's the case, then how are we supposed to meet again? Well, if I show them my talent, it'll be easy for me to get dispatched to deal with something. It can be counted as experience, but it's hard to arrange the meeting between us."

"I have thought about it. We can't really meet too often, so I'm planning to arrange a meeting every season. What do you think?"

"That's easy, I guess. I can monitor the Demon Relief Squad's mission from my position, and I can justify my action with their hatred after killing you to ensure there wouldn't be any revenge."

"Yes. Just don't take a mission that is too close to our place because it'll arouse some suspicion. And I'm pretty sure you can cover the distance between two cities easily, right?"

Anna nodded. "With my current strength, it won't be a problem."

"I'm going to rely on you a lot." Noel sighed. He wanted to leave, but the Zero Squad would find him easily. Although they would suspect something, he didn't want them to get involved too much in this matter.

"That's the gist of the plan. Do you have any dissatisfaction? I can alter it a bit." Noel asked.

Anna looked down, contemplating the pros and cons. "I don't have any problem with the plan itself. And it'll be a perfect opportunity for me to understand the whole problem. Though, I'm pretty sure you're going to start making contact with the Third Prince, right?"

"Yeah. I'll try to find a way to do it." Noel nodded.

"If that's the case, how about we make a little competition between us?"

"Competition?"

"Who can get more information! Just like this squad's tradition."

"..." Noel shook his head helplessly. "The game is one thing, but being reckless is another thing. By making this competition, one is bound to be reckless. So, I don't suggest the idea."

"Well..." Anna scratched the back of her head. She just wanted to make this bad situation a bit more enjoyable, but it seemed Noel wouldn't budge.

Surprisingly, Noel added, "Though, I don't mind about the game. I know that I'm smarter than you, but you're by no means a fool. So, I'm sure you know your limit. But to prevent you from being reckless, let's change the rule of the game."

"What's the rule?"

"It's not about winning, but about not losing."

Noel was indirectly implying that they should get information at their own pace instead of pushing themselves to get as much information as possible. The latter would make them reckless while the former was trying to motivate them a little bit.

"The loser will be serving the winner during the information exchange." Noel smirked.

Anna also smirked. "I'm not going to lose. Prepare to be my butler."

Chapter 343 Mission

"Alright. Let's set off." Paul nodded after confirming their items.

Surprisingly, Paul had decided to change the arrangement a bit. She asked Rose and Stella to handle the first carriage while Anna and Noel took care of the second one. It seemed Paul had noticed what Stella was doing and tried to put them together to see whether it was like Stella feared or not.

While sitting next to Anna, Noel asked, "By the way, do you know anything about this valley master?"

Anna thought for a moment. "Mhm... How do I start this... Do you know about the Tower Association?"

"Yes. Although there are people like Spirit ian, Knight, or whatever, the category is mainly split into two: One wielding their tool or one wielding their Spiritual Energy. Basically, if you're utilizing your Spiritual Energy with abilities like Freezing Crystal and such, then it's the latter. But if you're focusing on your weapon or tool, then you're the former.

"If you're the former, you can go anywhere and be fine, but if you're the latter, then you have to go to the tower. They're the association researching Spiritual Energy. Most of them don't wear weapons like this, instead, they're using an item with high Spiritual Energy conductivity.

"Though, I could say that they're very influential. For example, the Muscle Enhancement Spirit Technique came from them. So, yeah... they're that kind of organization.

"As for their connection to the valley master, the Tower Association has twelve Main Tower. Basically, their system is similar to the Demon Banner Army with its fifteen squads.

"But the difference is they don't have the sole leader. If they have to make the decision, they're usually using votes to decide.

"Anyway, this valley master is one of the twelve tower masters, known as Water Lord. He was adept at controlling water to the point it looked like it had become a part of his body. So, he's kind of prestigious and strong.

"The fact that he's asking us for help means there is something behind..." Anna suddenly fell silent as if remembering something.

"Anna?" Noel furrowed his eyebrows. She often did this, so he waited until she finished her thought.

'Now that I think about it, in my past life, the Water Lord was dead because there were overwhelming number of demons coming toward them. In the end, the valley was ruined and the Water Lord had to become the last line of defense, sacrificing his life.

'However, the Water Lord was strong, so it was impossible for him to die. At the very least, he was as strong as a Captain in the Demon Banner Army. So, it was weird for him to die around this time.

'Now that I think about it, Noel was supposed to join the Demon Relief Squad, right? Ah, wait. He joined the squad after this incident... Does that mean the Zero Squad had been wiped out along with the Water Lord in the past?'

Anna's expression continuously darkened the more she thought about this incident.

'If that's the case, did Noel join the new Zero Squad since he was supposed to graduate a week later? Then, does that mean Noel had never met these people in the past? Was this the reason he became so shrewd?'

Anna suddenly stood up and handed the reign to Noel before asking Paul who was riding not far from them.

"Paul! Can I ask you a question?"

"Mhm?" Paul was confused and hurriedly moved his horse next to the carriage. "What's wrong?"

"The people who were about to become a part of the Zero Squad must be in the first squad, right?"

Paul didn't understand why Anna asked this, but he nodded. "Yes. First and Second Squads are the candidates."

"Then, what's the condition to become a part of the Zero Squad? No, it's more like... what's the condition of the people right now? Are they bad guys?"

"Hmm? Why do you ask this kind of question?" Paul contemplated for a moment. "Well, since you have become a part of the Zero Squad, I think it's fine to tell you this. There are three main requirements to become one of us.

"The first is their achievement and strength. The second is their social skills since we're mainly to help people. And lastly, their kindness.

"The people in those two squads don't know much about the third condition, which is actually the most important. We're here to help people, so we want a good person to enter.

"What is currently happening in the first squad is that they're scheming at each other, trying to take them down so that they can be picked as a part of the zero squad. However, there are often lights in that darkness, shining so bright that you have to choose them. And those are the people who make the cut."

"!!!" Anna's body trembled after hearing it. She looked at Noel and realized Noel had been influenced by those people. They had no time to replace the zero squad when Noel came, so Noel ended up mingling with that kind of people.

In other words, there was a high chance that the Zero Squad would be wiped out during this mission.

"What's wrong? Is the answer too shocking for you?"

"Ehm, yes..." Anna nodded and timidly returned to her seat.

Paul couldn't understand her actions but moved away a bit, pondering why she suddenly asked that.

"Did you figure out something?" Noel asked. He knew Anna had a secret that could let her receive this kind of knowledge. But just like how she didn't pry into the secret of the system, he didn't go all the way to pressure her to explain her secret.

Anna gulped down and whispered to him. "I'm afraid the Zero Squad will be exterminated in this mission."

As if proving Anna's words, Noel also received the mission from the system... the mission that shocked him to the core because it could see the future.

[Mission: Save the Zero Squad]

[Description: The Zero Squad is going to be wiped out. Please save them.]

[Reward: Rune Mastery +1 Level, Rune Enchantment System, Hardening Rune, Softening Rune, Energy Gathering Rune.]

[Penalty: You, Anna, and all the members of the Zero Squad die.]

[Mission: Save the Silica Valley]

[Description: The Supreme Devil Organization is going to attack the Valley. Stop them.]

[Reward: Water Lord's Favor, Freezing Crystal +1 Level, Ice Infusion +1 Level.]

Chapter 344 Danger

"..." Noel's expression darkened when he saw the mission. Ardagan seemed to have the ability to predict the future, so the fact that he stated they would die meant they were truly going to die.

At the same time, he could see the reward of this mission. It was rare for the system to give this much as a reward. Although it was better to give Skill Points, he realized that Ardagan was planning something with these abilities.

'The reward is big, so the problem is big. The fact that it can wipe us out... Paul has broken through to Spirit Grandmaster not long ago and the Valley Master is as strong as Captain Clara... What kind of monsters are we dealing with?'

'Now that I think about it, Peak Level Demon is equal to a high level Spirit Master or a new Spirit Grandmaster. But there is another demon above that level called Superior Demon. But this kind of demon is like our Captain...

'If Ardagan is right that this is happening because of the Supreme Devil Organization, then does that mean they have some way to tame a Superior Demon?

'Seriously? What kind of existence can tame a demon as strong as our Captain? Someone like the commander who has reached the Spirit Transcendence Level? Or there won't be any demons attacking us?'

Noel contemplated for a moment before asking, "Is it all thanks to the demon attack?"

"Huh?" Anna furrowed her eyebrows. She thought for a moment and nodded. "Yes."

She wasn't aware that this situation was caused by the Supreme Devil Organization. She only thought there would be a powerful demon that could defeat all of them, which was the superior demon.

Even if the Valley Master couldn't stop it, it was better if they could ask for a backup.

Anna asked, "Are they asking for reinforcement from other squads as well?"

Paul, who heard it, couldn't help but reply, "No. Normally, if someone asks for our assistance, they won't ask for others. After all, they must be experiencing some destruction and that will be our primary task. Besides, we also have the strength that can solve the demons. So, there's basically no need to ask other squads besides us.

"Of course, if we deem the situation too dangerous, we are free to call any nearby squads to help us. But yeah, there's no guarantee they are close enough to aid us during the battle. And I still don't understand why you have been asking these weird questions to me."

"Mhm..." Anna scratched the back of her head. "I'm not very sure about this, but isn't this mission quite dangerous?"

"What do you mean?"

"The valley master is equal to our Captain, right? Then, if we're tasked with something that even he can't handle, doesn't that mean we're in a very dangerous situation?"

Paul shook his head. "As I said earlier, with the valley master in charge of this place, our main priority is not fighting. It'll be construction. Of course, there will be a time where we have to fight since it's better for the valley master not to make his move easily, showing all our cards.

"Hence, I believe that the situation is not that dangerous, considering the valley master will act when needed."

Noel had this concern. No matter what Anna said, it would be impossible for them to convince them to bring out more reinforcement unless they had a solid reason or proof.

So, Noel had been thinking of a way to convince them. If not the help from the other squad's captain, they had to bring their own captain here.

'No, wait. A single demon like this should be crushed by the valley master, but because this is coming from the Supreme Devil Organization...' Noel gulped down. 'Don't tell me, there will be a Devil Bishop assisting them?

'Well, it's true that I can't picture them taming a Superior Demon. But what if this Superior Demon is not tamed but lured? The Devil Bishop is luring this demon to this valley...'

Noel thought for a moment and asked, "Anna. What's the specialty of Silica Valley? Is there any particular reason it has to be defended at all cost?"

"Hmm?" Anna closed her eyes for a moment, recalling all the memory.

Since Anna had a hard time thinking about it, he couldn't help but ask out loud. "Stella, is there any specialty from Silica Valley? Or is there any reason it has to be defended at all cost?"

Stella was knowledgeable, so she might have the answer.

"..." The people were confused because this was the first time Noel acted out of character.

"The entire valley is a treasure," Stella shouted back. "There is said to be an ore vein underneath the valley. That ore vein is letting out a vast amount of Spiritual Energy, enriching the land. The Valley Master is said to be using that Spiritual Energy to enhance the water running down the valley to irrigate the farm underneath.

"I don't know much, but the farm seems to be related to Spiritual Energy Research that the Valley Master conducted. If I remember correctly, the product seems to be trying to smoothen your control over Spiritual Energy. It's said one of the best crops of the year can be sold for one thousand gold coins."

"!!!" Noel widened his eyes in shock. He thought, 'Don't tell me, the Supreme Devil Organization attacked this place to take control over it? Then, the research that the Valley Master conduct will be beneficial for them?'

"What's wrong with you two? Both of you are acting weird, you know!" Stella narrowed her eyes. She wanted Noel to stay with her instead of Anna because of this.

"Well, I might be paranoid over this little thing, but everything doesn't sum up. I'm pretty sure you've heard what Anna said earlier... so, yeah, why do they actually want us to go there instead of anyone else? Is the condition so bad that they need someone to help with the construction?

"If the buildings have been ruined, doesn't that mean the Valley Master has failed to protect his own place?"

"..." Everyone suddenly fell silent. With such a strong person, there should be no problem in protecting the entire thing. But at the same time, Valley Master was only one person. He couldn't protect everything by himself, especially against so many demons. So, this kind of destruction was as expected.

Even so, Noel and Anna had been acting like this at the same time, making them wonder if they were truly afraid or they were sharp enough to find something amiss.

Paul said, "In that case, let's talk to the Valley Master first before reaching any conclusion. If it's too dangerous, I'll be asking for reinforcement immediately."

Chapter 345 Arrival

"This is it." They had finally reached the valley after going around the hill.

The valley was hidden behind two ranges of hills going straight to the north. There was a river going down the valley, creating lives in this valley.

There was a huge castle three hundred meters away, standing tall to stop all the incoming danger. Behind the castle were huge fields filled with farms.

"Is there any destruction around that castle?" Noel narrowed his eyes, trying to see farther.

"I'm not sure because the view is blocked by them, but if they're attacked by monsters, their north should have become a barren ground... After all, the number the demons need to take down this castle is huge, so their steps would destroy all kinds of things." Paul shook his head. "Still, we can't see anything from here. It's better to go there and check it ourselves."

"In that case, Zion and I will be moving around the town," said Rose. Her sense was extraordinary and Zion was quick in his feet, so they were perfect to go around to gather information.

"Yeah, I'll leave it to you two. Jonathan and Noel will come with Ben and me to handle the negotiation with the valley master. Stella will go with Anna to see if you can find something suspicious." Paul nodded, assigning their task.

"Ehm? What?" Anna and Stella widened their eyes, not understanding why Paul went all the way to pair them up.

But the latter immediately walked to them. Even though he was smiling, they could only feel chills all over their bodies. He said with a strict tone. "If I were to see both of you arguing about a silly matter again..."

Stella and Anna nodded furiously, assuring him they wouldn't do something foolish again.

"Good then. Let's go." Paul was satisfied with their answer and immediately led the group to enter the city.

They were able to get in as soon as they saw the Demon Relief Squad's badge. The city was surprisingly clean even though they were far away from other places. It was bustling with people and most of them wore a smile on their faces.

'This is quite surprising. To think there is a good city like this in the middle of nowhere...' Noel muttered inwardly. 'The air is cool, the area also has enough sunlight, and the soil is fertile. It seems that the underground vein is truly giving a lot to this city.'

'And if the Supreme Devil Organization takes over this city, they will have a perfect place to fight the kingdom, considering this place is far away from other people. And any kind of movement will be spotted from the mountain ranges.'

'Besides, by killing the Water Lord, no one is going to help this city. As long as they surround the city with demons, people won't go to this place, allowing them to cultivate it for a long time.'

'Still, a Superior Demon, huh. And if my prediction is right, there will also be a Devil Bishop. Both of them are enough to eliminate all of us here. In other words, we need at least another Captain to handle the enemies this time...'

Noel didn't consider Dimitri again because he didn't know about his strength and didn't want to be reliant on him.

Hence, Noel was trying to figure out a way to ask for reinforcement.

They were guided to the castle where the Valley Master lived. As arranged, only four of them entered the castle while Paul dismissed the other four, allowing them to have fun around the city.

As soon as they entered this castle, they were greeted by huge staircases leading to the fourth floor.

"Mhm?" Paul narrowed his eyes, not understanding why the construction looked like this. Creating stairs straight to the fourth floor put immense pressure on the support, so it was better to create the foundation on each floor and connect them one by one with the stairs.

Yet, the stairs went straight to the fourth floor as if there was something hidden in these three floors.

As if expecting this kind of confused face, the butler, who had been working in this place for a long time, explained, "My Master's research place is behind this stair, so the stairs are this long."

"Not anyone can be invited into this place. The people, who have entered the gate have some strength, so I believe everyone has the ability to climb the stairs, right?" The butler smiled. Even though he only worked as a butler, Paul could feel that the butler's strength was close to a Spirit Grandmaster. Even Stella, who was the strongest in the group, wouldn't know whether she could win or not against this person.

Paul nodded. "We don't have any problem with the staircases, so please..." Paul extended his hand, asking the butler to guide them.

"Then, please forgive us for the inconvenience." The butler nodded and immediately climbed the stairs. "My Master's office is on the fourth floor. He has been waiting for you there."

"I see. It seems that we've made the Valley Master wait." Paul looked around to see if he could find anything. But because the huge stairs covered almost everything, he could only see the white walls on both sides.

When glancing back, his heart skipped a beat, realizing he had to go down this long. He somehow had some fear of going down after this because the long, wide stairs were messing with his balance.

'Hmm... this is surprising. So, there is a construction that can confuse me like this.' Paul narrowed his eyes. 'The height is similar to a city wall, but those stairs aren't this wide, so they aren't confusing my balance... Interesting.'

Noel, on the other hand, noticed something different from Paul. Instead of the construction, he was confused why they didn't see any other person after entering this place. With a castle this big, it was normal to employ at least thirty maids and butlers to take care of this castle. Yet, they didn't find anyone.

"..." Noel felt a bit suspicious.

Chapter 346 Problem

As soon as they reached the fourth floor, they found a single hallway with only one door at the end. The butler immediately led them to the room and knocked on the door. "Master. I've brought the guests."

"Come in."

The butler opened the door after getting the confirmation, showing a huge hall inside. The hall was filled with bookshelves, and there was a huge table in the center of the hall where the Water Lord seemed to be doing all his works. There were various books and large pieces of paper on the table, so it was clear why he needed that big table.

The Water Lord looked like a man in his early thirties. He had slanted eyes and a gentle smile. He was wearing big round glasses, making his face look innocent. His long blue hair was tied neatly on his back.

Despite meeting the guest, he was wearing a plain white shirt and long black pants. It seemed these were his usual clothes when working, considering he only took a glance at them before returning to his book.

After they came in, he finally dropped the book and said, "Sorry about my display. There has been too much work recently, so I don't have time to change my clothes and tidy up this room to meet you."

Paul nodded politely. "It's alright, Valley Master. We know that you're a busy person."

The Valley Master smiled. "Still, please sit down."

The butler guided them to the big table and brought them the chairs. After that, he bowed to them and said, "I'll prepare the snacks for you."

The Valley Master glanced at their faces and said, "It seems there is a new guy among you."

It seemed he noticed Noel's strength couldn't be compared to the others, making him look like a new guy.

"There's no need for you to worry, Valley Master. We can guarantee his skill." Paul thought he was worried because Noel would be too weak to handle the task. So, he had to assure him.

The Valley Master didn't reply to the assurance as if it was not the point. He paused for a moment and asked, "So, are you going to hear about the mission right away or do you have any questions about this place first?"

It seemed he knew that they were gathering the information from the city. So, Paul said, "It will be better if we can hear the problem first. After all, this is what we're here for."

"Do you mind if I tell you about it while I'm reading these documents?"

"Please."

The Valley Master nodded. "The problem is simple. There is poison in our water supply. Although we've managed the city with the water reserve, it's going to be a problem for us if we can't get a new water supply."

"Are you asking us to build a well?"

"No. The water supply is from Eleist Mountain uphill. I'm sure you come from that place. My people have tried to investigate it but found nothing. So, we don't know the cause."

"Then, if it's an investigation, it's better to give this job to the Demon Observer Squad."

"No. It's too much work to do an investigation, and by the time you finish the investigation, my people will have died from dehydration."

Paul contemplated for a moment. "So, you want us to drain the water and allow the fresh water to flow?"

"Yes. What do you think you should do in this case?"

"We have checked the topography around here. There is a small lake on the hill, which should be where the poison accumulated. We can block the water flow from uphill first and drain the lake before letting the freshwater flow like usual."

Paul determined this was the problem since the Water Lord acknowledged the solution was to drain the water. And the only thing they could drain was this lake.

"That's good enough." The Valley Master nodded with a serious expression.

"Then, do you have any problem with the monsters?" He asked.

"I do have a bit of trouble. Do you know the poison called Winding Beast Poison?"

"Please enlighten us."

"The Winding Beast Poison is used to make the demon become berserk. This poison was found two decades ago. Well, it's also effective for humans, but instead of making the humans berserk, they'll have some sort of organ failure. There were already a total of thirty deaths before I figured out the issue.

"But the problem is the demons... You should know how long this valley is, right..." The Valley Master smirked, testing the Demon Relief Squad.

Paul narrowed his eyes. "I see. So that's why you want to drain the water instead of doing anything else."

The Valley Master smiled. "The river is flowing to the Demon Territory and making the demons berserk, causing them to attack us. Instead of letting the water continuously flow down, I'd like to handle the source of the problem first before doing anything else. After all, I need to call some fighting squads and investigation squads from the Demon Banner Army and still have to deal with the water problem..."

"That's understandable." Paul nodded in agreement. Even he would do the same thing in this situation. It was better to solve the source of the problem first before dealing with the rest. "If that's the case, we'll try to fix the water supply as soon as possible."

"Thank you. I'll reward you properly if this is done." The Valley Master smiled, satisfied with their answer.

However, he noticed something different from Noel.

He was actually looking down, falling into deep thought as if he found something weird.

Noticing the Valley Master's gaze, Paul glanced to the side and saw Noel acting in his own world.

"Noel." Paul tugged his hand to wake him up.

"Ah!" Noel realized what he was doing and immediately bowed. "I apologize for my rudeness."

"It's fine. It seems that this young friend is thinking about something. Can you share it with us?"

"This..." Noel scratched the back of his head, not knowing whether to say it or not.

"It's fine. Tell us everything... After all, it's better to have more people talking about this matter since we'll get new perspectives." The Valley Master waved his hand, calming Noel down.

"Then..." Noel took a deep breath before his expression became solemn. "Valley Master... This might be rude for me to ask. But are you trying to use us as baits?"

Chapter 347 Accepting The Job

"Valley Master, this might be rude for me to ask. But are you trying to use us as baits?"

"Noel!" Paul frowned because he never thought Noel would blurt out something like that.

The Valley Master was only surprised but not offended. He closed his eyes for a moment as if trying to regain his calm before asking, "So, why do you say so? Can you explain your thought to me?"

Noel carefully arranged the words in his mind, making sure not to attack the Valley Master too much but also to send enough messages to the rest of the team.

"First of all, there is one thing that I can't understand. The water runs from the south, which is the mountain. And the north is the demon territory. Just by looking at this fact alone, we can see that this is not the work of a demon.

"With your strength, I doubt there will be a demon that can get past this castle, so I arrive at the conclusion that this is someone's work," Noel explained his first point.

"Understandable." The Valley Master nodded. "Continue."

While the Valley Master was listening to him, Paul and the others didn't know what to do. After all, this might enrage the Valley Master. At the same time, they remembered when Noel had a suspicion about this mission on the way.

It was clear that something was missing, but they still wondered whether this was just Noel being paranoid or a fact.

"My second point is about the poison itself. I'm a bit lacking in my understanding of demons, but I haven't experienced a demon strong enough to utilize a strategy like this. More so when you can't even find the culprit.

"Also, we can't forget the fact that the choice of poison is the one inciting the demons. A powerful demon doesn't need to use poison to bring a massive army of demons.

"With that kind of poison running down the valley, it's clear that this is the work of someone that wants to destroy or take over this place."

"..." Paul looked down, falling into deep thought. He realized he hadn't put too much thought into this matter.

The Valley Master, on the hand, smiled after listening to him.

Noel furrowed his eyebrows, becoming a bit more suspicious. "Do you need me to continue, Valley Master?"

"No. It's enough. The fact that this is the handiwork of someone is clear, and everyone in this room should be able to figure out why I send you there." The Valley Master admitted it without hesitation. "Yes, I'm sending you as baits."

"!!!" Paul and the others raised their eyebrows in shock. They never expected they would be backstabbed like this. Paul glared at the Valley Master and demanded his explanation. "Valley Master. What do you mean by baits?"

"I have a good reason for doing this, especially hiding that fact from all of you." The Valley Master took out the map of this valley along with the Demon Territory. There was surprisingly a huge red dot on the map located in the north of the valley. "Two months ago, my people found a sleeping bear when doing their exploration.

"Its body is colossal and has a lot of power. A single swipe of its paw can even destroy this castle. The bear is this dot..." The Valley Master pointed at the red dot. "Take a look at the distance and the river carefully."

"..." Paul furrowed his eyebrows. "It's not that far..."

"Yes. The demon bear is hibernating during the cold season, especially this winter. However, due to the poison that causes a lot of ruckus among the low-level demons who don't have the need to hibernate, there is a risk that the bear will wake up."

Noel narrowed his eyes, staring at the map. "So, you want to make us the baits? With our strength, it's possible to fend off the enemies while draining the water. Just by looking at the trajectory and their objective, it's clear that they'll prevent us from draining the water.

"Hence, it's better to send us there. However, there is one question in my mind... How strong is that bear?"

The Valley Master smiled as if expecting this question. "That bear is a Superior Demon."

"!!!" The people from the Demon Relief Squad trembled. Their squad might be strong, but they weren't strong enough to handle a Superior Demon. Only their captain could handle this demon. "This is..."

The Valley Master stated with a serious expression. "Don't worry. I'll handle that Superior Demon myself. Although it's strong, I can repel it from here. The only reason why I let the Superior Demon live this whole time is because of its life cycle.

"This demon bear will hibernate for more than half a year. During that time, this place experiences peace. By letting that bear reign the Demon Territory around this area, I can have an easier time compared to a more aggressive demon.

"That's why I'll handle the bear while you take care of this culprit." The Valley Master explained.

Even Paul had no objections to such a plan. The Valley Master had been using that bear to shield this place as well.

Looking at this fact alone, he understood why the Valley Master wanted to solve this problem as soon as possible. And by using the Demon Relief Squad to drain this lake, it was clear that he was very serious about dealing with the poison, which would trigger the action of the culprit.

Noel didn't say anything after all this explanation as if he had agreed to take on the task.

It seemed he had underestimated Noel's observation skill. As one would expect from a noble, even though the house had fallen, it didn't change the fact that Noel was the son of the richest person in the kingdom. There was no way both of them would be ordinary.

Paul nodded his head and said, "If that's the case, then our squad will take on this task."

"If you need help, you might go to my butler. At the very least, he can go to assist you in dealing with this problem."

"Understood. Thank you for your concern. I'll discuss the plan with my squad first before working on it. Please let us handle the problem."

The Valley Master nodded while seeing Paul and the rest stood up, ready to leave.

Before that, the Valley Master stopped them. "Wait!"

"Is there any problem?" Paul frowned.

The Valley Master looked at Noel. "You're good, kid. Your name?"

Noel contemplated for a moment. But considering he was famous because of his fallen household, there was no need to hide it anymore. Noel declared with a proud smile. "Noel Ardagan."

Chapter 348 Suspicion

The Valley Master was looking at the silhouettes of the people who had just left his castle.

"It's been a while since someone managed to pique my interest. To think there is someone who can see through that plan in just a glance..." The Valley Master narrowed his eyes. "Noel Ardagan, huh..."

"Do you need me, Master?" The butler entered the room and bowed, asking for the instruction.

"If I'm not wrong, Ardagan Family has..."

"Yes. They've fallen after the battle for the throne. The richest man in the kingdom, Luke Ardagan, is executed together with his wife. His riches are seized by the royal family. But there is currently no leader that occupies their territory."

"No one is occupying that land? Even though that land is the reason why the Ardagan Family becomes the richest family?"

"The Count once became famous for saying, 'The land is like iron ore. Without great experts tempering it and turning the ore into a sword, nothing will prosper.' And that's why after the execution, all the experts who have been working for the Count scatter. Some join another family, some are living in seclusion, some are missing."

"Hoh?" The Valley Master narrowed his eyes. "I see. It seems that the former Count is the head and those experts are his limbs. Cutting the limbs won't take down the count, but taking down the head will destroy the family..."

The Valley Master contemplated for a moment before smiling. "Can you see it, Azhen?"

"What is it, Master?"

"The new head." The Valley Master smirked.

"!!!" The butler's body shook a bit as if understanding his intention. "Master, are you going to..."

"Well, it doesn't feel bad to have the next generation owe me something. Once they ask for your help, make sure you keep him alive no matter what."

The Valley Master didn't know at that time, who would actually be the one owing the favor.

...

After finishing their discussion, Paul led them to an inn while waiting for the rest to return.

Surprisingly, all of them had a troubled expression as if they had seen something ominous.

Rose and Zion reported what they found without hesitation. "We've gone to the city wall and the land is completely destroyed. I don't know how the Valley Master handled the monsters, but it's clear that they're only attacking one side of the wall. As for the number, we suspect... in the thousand."

Paul pinched the bridge of his nose, contemplating for a moment. Before saying anything, he asked Noel's opinion, considering he had seen Noel's true ability earlier. "Noel. What do you think?"

"Actually, there is one thing that I haven't told you during the discussion."

"What is it?" Paul frowned. He should have told him during the conversation so that he could negotiate with the Valley Master. But that thought vanished as soon as Noel shared his opinion.

"Calling us to this place is surely bringing the attention, not only from this place, but also those outsiders that want to crush this place. Do you think the enemies who can do something like this are so foolish that they will underestimate us?"

"What do you mean?" Paul was still confused since Noel's explanation was all over the place.

"To put it simply, we have the Valley Master and you, a new Spirit Grandmaster. Suppose the Valley Master could stop the demon bear, there is no way the enemy will send their people to their deaths just to stop you..."

"There is a chance that they have prepared enough to kill you, either with a complex plan or with overwhelming strength."

"Overwhelming Strength... Wait, are you saying..." Paul gasped as if realizing Noel's true concern.

"Yes. The enemy might be someone at the Valley Master's level or the Valley Master might be the culprit himself. But because I couldn't find any proof for the latter, I didn't say it during the negotiation."

"I don't think the Valley Master would kill us, considering there would be a huge conflict with the Demon Banner Army. If that's the case, there might be an outsider as strong as our captain... But that kind of outsider that doesn't mind killing us..."

Noel nodded. "Yes. There is only one organization that has the ability to kill us and doesn't mind picking a fight with the Demon Banner Army. I'm afraid they're sending a Devil Bishop to this area. If this is the case, after exterminating our group, this Devil Bishop will sneak attack the Valley Master, who is occupied by the bear, to take over the area."

"!!!" The people were shocked. Stella asked with a horrified expression. "Is that why you asked me about this town's specialty?"

"Yes." Noel nodded.

Stella gasped, wondering how far ahead he could see. 'To think Noel had seen through this situation even before reaching the place... I guess the son of a tiger is also a tiger...'

Anna, on the other hand, had known that Noel seemed to be able to gain complete information after she gave some clues about it. And everything he said would always be correct.

So, Noel actually made up all these suspicions to direct the group into thinking about the existence of the Supreme Devil Organization. He didn't have concrete proof that the Supreme Devil Organization was the culprit, but he knew they were the culprit.

All he had to do was create the conspiracy theory to make them believe they were the culprit.

Paul closed his eyes, realizing this matter was more complex than he thought. He admitted there was no way they could stop a Devil Bishop. At the same time, it was impossible for the Valley Master to die in the Demon Bear's hand. So, the only way to kill the Valley Master was to join hands with the demon.

He had heard about the rumor of the Supreme Devil Organization taming the demons to fight alongside them.

Suddenly, his body trembled as if he had received an even greater shock. He stared at Noel and asked with a shaking voice. "Don't tell me... You want me to call any captain around here to sneak attack the ambusher?"

Noel smirked. "Aren't trump cards meant to be used to flip the situation around?"

Chapter 349 Trust

"Aren't trump cards meant to be used to flip the situation around?"

Paul was impressed. This was the first time someone was giving this kind of plan to him, but remembering how he came up with a plan during the demon siege, it was clear that Noel was capable of doing something like this in an instant.

Paul closed his eyes for a moment, contemplating. The others were also trying to think about this plan. They might not be as good as Noel, but by no means, they were dumb.

The plan made sense. Although there were some flaws in this plan, they were just minor flaws that could be fixed by their individual contribution. So, they nodded their heads, agreeing to this plan.

Paul was the last one to give his nod because he had to consider the lives of his group as well as the stability of the Demon Relief Squad. If their plan failed, they had to handle the consequence to the point they had to face their own demise. So, they needed to be careful here since retreat was also an option.

"..." Paul thought for a moment and asked, "What's the nearest squad from us?"

Rose hurriedly moved away to fetch the map from her bag and pointed at two spots. "The first one is Demon Barrier Squad, which is located in Skizo Town, two days away from here. The second one is Demon Extermination Squad, but Captain Shale is..."

"In the headquarters, huh..." Paul pinched the bridge of his nose. "Our Demon Relief Squad is a week from here, so I guess we can only rely on the Demon Barrier Squad..."

With all the information they had, Paul finally made a decision. "We'll delay our work for five days. The first day, we'll have Rose, Stella, and Zion to check the condition of the lake and scout around the area.

"The second day, we'll measure the intensity of the poison and do some rough calculations. On the third day, we'll try to make a simulation to drain all the water.

"In the fourth day, we will try to drain a portion of the water and the fifth day will be the battle day where we go all out to bring out the enemy.

"As for the reinforcement, I'll send the message to our branch located in Lumino City to request backup from the captain of the Demon Barrier Squad. It's only one day away, so the time should be enough.

"The letter... Noel, you'll go with me and write the letter, explaining all the plan. You're the one coming up with this ambush plan, so you'll tell them about the exact plan. As for the rest, you're free to move around the town and gather more information if you can. Unless you're needed that day, you're free."

They exchanged nods, showing their support for this plan.

"Good. Let's do it this way then." Paul nodded with a serious expression and dismissed the group.

Since dusk was about to come, they didn't do any work today. Instead, they simply toured around the city to get some fresh air.

Meanwhile, Noel and Paul were discussing the letter. Noel had written the content about the ambush, which got Paul's approval.

"This is good enough, I think."

"Paul... I know you must have noticed it. Why did you still support me?" Noel asked.

Paul raised his eyebrows in surprise before scratching the back of his head. He patted Noel's back and said, "You're a member of our Zero Squad, and I'm its vice-captain. It's obvious that I have to support you with all my might. Even if the chance of an assassination attempt is less than fifty percent, I'll still try to bring the reinforcement.

"Zion and Jonathan have told me about your circumstances. It seems you've been fighting alone this whole time. Although I don't know what's your relationship with Anna, who murdered your family, I know that you don't have many people to rely on.

"That's why I'll become one of those people for you. Our squad is a peculiar one... Jonathan has that gloomy appearance because of his dark past, Stella has a bright smile on her face, but she's the one who struggles the most. Rose wasn't born with those senses, it was because of her harsh living conditions that her senses were heightened.

"Zion might look like that now, but in the past, it would be good if he could even eat something every two days. Ben was a slave, and he would be beaten if he couldn't do everything because his owner wasn't that wealthy to afford another slave to do another job. And even I had my own share of problems.

"Yet, despite all that, everyone could shine brightly and help people around us. We all know each other weaknesses, yet, we don't use them to our own advantage to bring each other down. Do you know why?" Paul smirked. "It's trust. And I trust you, Noel. So, you, too, should trust us... trust the Demon Relief Squad. We'll support you."

Noel looked down. His heart felt heavy, but a smile couldn't help but appear on his face. The squad was truly a unique one. And this might be the reason why they were there to help people.

He had lost that trust when his family was executed. He thought people approached him because they wanted to do something, so he could no longer trust anyone, including Anna. If not for her persistence, he wouldn't have started trusting her.

Although he didn't say it, he felt it might be fine to place his trust in others for a bit.

Noel nodded and handed the letter with a smile. "The letter is finished, so..."

"Yeah." Paul didn't say anything more. He simply took the letter and left the room, leaving Noel the time to think.

...

Unbeknownst to them, Noel wasn't the only one who thought about this plan. As a Valley Master, the Water Lord also had some suspicion about the culprit and an assassination attempt.

That was why he had asked for the Demon Relief Squad to help him... the 'Whole' Demon Relief Squad. That meant the invitation included their captain, Clara.

Clara was standing in the branch of the Demon Banner Army located in Lumino City.

"It seems that the storm is approaching. To think that even one of the twelve masters of the tower association would ask for my help..." Clara smirked. "I wonder if any of my squad will realize this plan and notify me... I'll be disappointed if they can't figure this out."

However, there was one miscalculation that no one would ever realize. In the past life, the Demon Relief Zero Squad was exterminated. Even Anna didn't know whether Clara had participated in this fight or not.

No matter what, the Zero Squad was still crushed by the enemy. And Anna had been changing the past life this whole time. The accumulated effect that had yet to take place would begin to unfold.

Could Noel and Anna actually change the fate of the zero squad?

Chapter 350 Gathering Information

The next day.

Zion, Stella, and Rose immediately headed straight to the lake to do their job. The rest were taking their time around the city while Noel and Anna had decided to go around together.

"To think that you manipulated the conversation like yesterday." Anna smirked.

"Mhm..." Noel nodded, remembering what Paul said before. He kind of felt bad since if what Paul said was true, he didn't have to resort to manipulation. "Either way, there is something that I want to hear from the people around here."

"What is it?" Anna's expression became serious, wondering what kind of information he had received.

Noel thought for a moment before smiling back, "Just follow me around."

"Tsk." Anna clicked her tongue. Though, she kept following him to see what was going on.

Noel walked around the town and found a stall of fruits. He came to this stall without hesitation. His expression was filled with a smile as if he was enjoying the town. "The fruits look good."

"Oh my. You have great eyes. We picked this not long ago, so they're still fresh." The woman chuckled, flattered. She also noticed Anna who was next to him.

The moment Noel said, "How much for a bag?" the woman grabbed the bag while saying, "It's 5 copper. You don't seem to be someone from around here. Do you come to this place recently?"

"Yes. We're just sightseeing around here." Noel chuckled while raising one finger to tell her he wanted one bag.

"Oh, do you like this place?"

"Yes. I love the sight when I arrived here. The valley was truly beautiful."

"Is that so? It would be even more beautiful if not being harassed by the demons. Recently, there were a lot of demons attacking this place."

"What? Isn't that dangerous? Aren't you going to leave this place?" Noel asked with a shocked expression.

"No way. What can a woman like me do to leave this place? This place is a blessing for a woman like me since I can take care of the farm and sell it like this. Besides, this place has the esteemed Water Lord that takes care of us, so we love this place."

"Oh! From the looks of it, the Water Lord really takes care of his people here. I haven't even found any slums in this city unlike other towns."

"It's because the Water Lord takes care of us well. In fact, a third of the people who live here are former slaves. He bought us and released us, granting us protection. I heard there was someone who got in trouble with the Water Lord when creating trouble for us. So, this place is a blessing for all of us."

"Is that so? The Water Lord seems to be a genuinely good guy."

"Of course! I'd rather help the fight against those demons and remain in this place instead of searching for another home." The woman nodded with a proud smile.

"This seems to be a truly wonderful place. I'd certainly love to visit this place again when it has become stable."

"Yes, you should do it." The woman agreed without hesitation. "Since you're traveling with your girlfriend, then let me give you a bit of service here."

The woman put in two more apples before giving the bag.

"Thank you so much. Are you sure about this?"

"Of course. Please take it." The woman chuckled.

"Thanks." Noel nodded and gave her five copper coins. He then held Anna's hand and gently dragged her away.

Anna didn't understand what he was doing this whole time.

"What are you doing?" Anna's eyes were glued to the hand held by Noel. She never thought Noel would be this bold. He didn't even correct her when she called her his girlfriend.

"You haven't noticed what I want to do?" Noel widened his eyes in amusement. "Well, I'll tell you about it, but for now, just act like this until we reach the next block."

"Mhm..." Anna nodded while furrowing her eyebrows. Of course, her gaze hadn't moved even an inch. She wondered why Noel acted like this and she also felt a bit frustrated for being the only one flustered about this.

As soon as they took a turn, Noel slowed down his pace while extending the bag, asking her to take some to eat. He also had let go of her hand so that she could grab one.

"..." Anna grabbed one without saying a single thing.

Noel, on the other hand, began to explain his action. "When you are a merchant that wants to open a branch in a city, you usually go around the town first and even spend some money to understand the town's situation.

"The commoners might feel pressured if they know we're nobles, so it's better to talk casually with them. There's no need for manners or whatever we've learned as noble. This way, the commoners will feel safe and casual.

"That's where we begin to strike up a conversation with them. Just praise the city and the lord for seeing their reaction. If they're looking repulsive or their answer seems a bit stretched, we know that the lord is not praiseworthy. And if they're looking proud like that, we know that this city is in good hands.

"Of course, one person is not enough. We're going to spend the whole day talking to people in all directions to listen to their stories. This way, we'll be able to hear unbiased opinions. I hope that your stomach doesn't give up anytime soon. We'll be having a lot of food after this." Noel smirked.

"Well... I don't really mind since all the fat will be gone after some training. But I still don't understand why do we have to do this..."

"It's simple. I want to check the Water Lord's character. If he's trustworthy, it means he isn't related to the current enemy. If there are a few bad rumors, we have to be suspicious of him and the plan might change. That's why."

"Oh..." Anna nodded in understanding. She truly learned a lot the longer she was with Noel. It was very different from what she had learned from her teacher.

She couldn't help but hear her voice when remembering her. The voice gave a shiver in her mind.

'You're a noble. Commoners will always be beneath you, their lives are in your hand. If you don't like them, you just have to kill them.'

Anna's breath became heavy all of a sudden when she hallucinated blood on her hands, the blood of the commoners she had just killed.

'That's right. This is the pleasure of a ruler. They're not humans, they're just tools for you to use.'

"Anna?" Noel's voice suddenly entered her ears.

Her body jolted and her head looked up. She realized she had stopped walking.

"What's wrong with you?"

Anna made an awkward smile and said, "Nothing. I just remembered something bad, but that's not important right now. Let's go around the city. I'm curious how you talk with others..."