

Evolution 169

Chapter 169: The Two Vows.

The Duskbound Order's brand ignited at once, bright dark red flames engulfing Lord Darius in a raging inferno.

The Duskbound Order's brand could act as a safety net, and also... as an annihilation mark, making its members understand their life and death were under the organization's control.

Lord Darius gritted his teeth and remained silent throughout the whole process; not a single whimper, beg, or prayer was heard... Even when his soul was burned as well.

He ate the flames with his pride intact, turning into a cloud of ash.

The last thought coursing through his mind was: This isn't over...

His soul and body were burnt, yet he still thought like this... Was it a delusion, believing he could outrun death, or did it go deeper than this?

Only he knew... or what remained of him.

As his ash drifted, its luster was feasted on by the Shadow Dimension. Yet, the Bishop didn't glance at it once.

His mind was already working on the next move to offset the consequences of this failure.

'Do I have to make a move to collect the Blood of Daywalkers? Or should I find someone to purchase a Blood Marble from? No... Never,' The Bishop thought calmly.

It was more than a matter of ego... The Bishop would rather arrive at the Silent Convergence missing some part of his quota than be caught doing the work of pawns or seeking help from outsiders.

What would the other Bishops think of him? They would shame him under the eyes of the Black Veil and his peers.

A Bishop doing pawn duties? It sent a message of a Bishop failing to manage his pawns, which put a risk on his position.

Instead of promotion, he would get demoted.

'I will go... I will take it in and accept the punishment...' the Bishop decided, his eyes affixed on the treasured eyes of Levi. 'Their emergence must be unflawed... Only then can I guarantee a promotion.'

The Bishop understood that the presentation of the gifted eyes would simply offset the punishment... and he was still dreaming of climbing the ladder.

'Next Silent Convergence, then.'

As his decision was made, the Bishop focused on the ones who ruined his promotion; his wrath was still unsated by Lord Darius' death.

Levi, Arthur, Lord Idriss, Velmira, Nurah, Jojo, Seraphis, Ysara Blackthorn, Feng Ling, and anyone who had any major impact.

Then, he wrote them in a long, shadowy scroll and folded it to the side... His movements were quick, yet a single glimpse could be stolen of their content.

A glimpse of its title: The Hound's Hit List.

'Descendant... I spared you as an appreciation gesture for blessing me with your treasured eyes... But,' the Bishop murmured, his shadowy gaze affixed in the gloomy sky, 'it seems our fates are still intertwined... and not in a good way.'

In his eyes, the Bishop had truly shown Levi mercy by letting him live... But in reality, letting a blind child live in a world ruled by darkness and nightcrawlers... Where is the mercy in that?

He even said it... Believing that Levi would become a Sleepwalker sooner or later. The Bishop was a twisted entity... Yet, he was the only one failing to see himself as such.

'Hound... Once you free yourself, you shall supervise the Heliodor region until I find someone else.'

The Bishop sent this dimensional message, knowing that the Hound could hear it even if he was trapped in Seraphis' Dominion.

It was called a dimensional message for a reason... Almost nothing could block its transmission.

As expected.

The Hound received the message.

But he paid it no regard.

For he was in a much more serious conundrum than the Bishop had imagined.

At the moment, the Hound sat motionless upon a golden throne amidst a sea of blood stretching in every direction, resembling a pool of spoiled wine.

Bloated, rotting corpses slowly drifted in an endless circle around the throne... Some of them his enemies, others far less familiar... Innocents caught in the crossfire.

There were thousands of them... Yet, these were only the ones shown on the surface.

God knows what was hidden at its depths.

The throne was the sole beacon of light in this unnamed realm of hell.

How did the Hound end up defeating Seraphis? That's a story for another time...

But anyone familiar with the Hound's persona would realize that he had torn this throne from Seraphis, thinking it was a trophy of war.

He had dragged the old king down, shattered his crown, and claimed the throne not out of ambition... but to make him watch.

Seraphis, chained and broken, was to see the Hound rise where he fell.

But the moment he sat down... Seraphis's smile widened, and the throne held the Hound down.

His legs wouldn't move... His body sank in weight... Not physical, something more profound.

Maddening whispers assaulted his mind... repeating most of the time:

You do not sit on this throne to rule... You sit to carry.

The throne responded not with power, but with memory... Seraphis' memory.

The memory of the Fallen King.

The memory of the man burdened by all, helped by none.

The memory of the man the Hound hated the most for all the suffering that befell his sole remaining family member... his grandmother.

The Hound tried to rise, but it only caused the throne to tighten its grip.

The whispers returned and said:

Not until you see.

Not until you understand.

Not until you accept what it means to wear the crown.

And so... He watched and listened... Experiencing every core memory of the King he blamed his sufferings on.

Only when he accepted it would the Sin of Pride bestow the crown upon him... and terminate Seraphis forever.

For the Sin of Pride had no use for a man who abandoned his throne.

"Seraphis... This burden of yours... As heavy as it may be, I shall bear it and show you that it was no excuse to blind yourself to our anguish." The Hound spoke into the aether, his raspy voice still unconvinced, unforgiving...

"I swear it on my Nana's life."

As his echoing voice faded... Only the throne whispers remained, challenging his vow until the day he reclaimed the throne as his.

Three Days Later...

Near the borders of Heliodor, in a wide and desolate graveyard known as the Fields of Silence, a funeral was held.

This was the sacred ground where Heliodor's citizens and Daywalkers were buried over the past century.

Nearly two hundred thousand graves... the final resting place.

Yet, the citizens who perished here were the fortunate ones... As millions had graced this land, dying without a resting tomb.

Their bodies were unfound... But not forgotten.

Placed at the highest accessible ridge overlooking the Fields of Silence, a massive monolith was built.

It was overlooking the vast grave fields beyond the nearest settlement, rising up to twenty meters into the sky.

It was shaped like a sharp obelisk, its base broad and firm, gradually narrowing until it ended in a radiant sunburst crown made of nine-pointed spikes.

The stone was deep golden-amber, with dark, natural cracks running through its surface.

Each side of the monolith was carefully carved... one face showing thousands of names etched in beautiful shining calligraphy.

Another was filled with a long inscription, describing the most prominent achievements of Daywalkers or citizens alike.

The third side displayed detailed carvings of Daywalkers in battle, protecting helpless civilians.

The last side was smooth and empty, untouched by carvings.

A white page.

Yet, many wished that it remained like that.

Meanwhile, the graves were old and scattered neatly, with some stones cracked or leaning, others nearly hidden beneath wild grass.

The capital did its best to keep the graves maintained, but nature and time were cruel even on the dead...

At the far end of the graveyard, more than a hundred new graves had been dug up and left as such... Wooden tombs were placed on top of the graves, awaiting silently...

Near them, a quiet, somber crowd had gathered... Close to a thousand, if not more.

A mixture of citizens and Daywalkers... Each of them had a connection to one of those perished Daywalkers.

Fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, friends... and the list goes on. More than one hundred Daywalkers died, and their death affected thousands.

They weren't the only ones participating in the funeral... The rest of the citizens in each settlement, outpost, and city were tuning in to the governmental live stream, causing a gloomy silence to engulf the region.

No one was working or studying... Today was for the dead.

After the Blood Hunters returned to the capital, and news spread of their success in conquering the Lord of the Broken Peak's nest... Everyone lost their minds in ecstasy.

An Abyssal Lost Nest was already too much news... But to hear that they had slain Grave'Maw, the nightcrawler responsible for the deaths of thousands of their people, their happiness couldn't be contained.

Unfortunately, before they could go down to the streets and celebrate, they received another piece of news... This one wasn't as glamorous.

The Sunstrike Agency was wiped out in their raid.

The celebrations were halted... their happiness was short-lived.

The briefing was done live by the High Chancellor himself, telling everyone that the Sunstrike Agency under Lord Darius had fought to the bitter end.

Unfortunately, when they were winning the war, the nest's lord had decided to bring everyone with him, using a type of gas called writhlurk worm... Not even Lord Darius was powerful enough to survive it.

Then, he concluded the briefing with the date of the mass funeral and a report of the perished Daywalkers... Commending them for their heroism.

When the briefing was happening... Levi was in the hospital with his brother and friends, doing a routine check-up.

Levi had listened to it with a deadpan expression, already connecting the dots and figuring out the truth.

The Harrowing Forest, Mantis, Demetris, the Sunstrike Agency's unexpected wipeout... What did all of them have in common?

All were related to moles from the Duskbound Order.

Levi realized that the Sunstrike Agency could be wiped out, but when adding Lord Darius to the mix? It didn't make any sense.

Lord Darius's battle experience was too rich to let him fall for such a trap...

When put like this, Levi figured out that Lord Darius was the mole, and he was either gotten rid of by the government or he escaped.

He trusted the latter, knowing that the Duskbound Order's brand could be used to escape... Someone as strong as Lord Darius could never be lower than a pawn in the organization.

Yet, what supported Levi's assumption the most was the voice... Although Lord Darius had spoken to Levi using Demetris' voice, the cadence was the same.

After he scoured the network for Lord Darius' speeches and such, he found that they shared the same cadence... This was all the evidence he needed.

Lord Darius was one of the nightmares visiting him on that cursed night.

Lying in the hospital bed, Levi listened to the High Chancellor praise his achievements and hail him as a fallen hero... and the words left a bitter taste.

But, as a rational young man... He understood that the government must hate it as much as him, but it had to be done.

Lord Darius and his agency must not be tainted by anything related to spies, moles, sleepwalkers, the Duskbound Order, or such.

Their elimination had to be written in pure ink... Otherwise, the innocent Sunstrike Daywalkers sacrificing their lives to uncover them would have their image smeared too.

Most importantly, the citizens would have their reality shattered at the realization that a Sleepwalker or a Fallen Daywalker had reached the upper echelon in their region, possessing access to their most private information and decisions in the High Council.

How could anyone ever trust the government or agencies?

Thus, the secret must die with them... No matter how unfair or cruel... Lord Darius, Sir Alaric, and any other mole in the agency had to be honored in the same way.

At the moment, at the second line of the crowd in the funeral, Levi was spotted sitting with his arms placed on his knees and a posture straight as an arrow.

He wore all black, the same suit he took to the auction... the sole suit in his possession.

Arthur, Jojo, Shia, Jamal, Sergio, Rayan, Madam Naima, Velmira, and many others were wearing the same...

Shia scolded Levi for wearing all black in an auction, telling him that he was emitting a depressive vibe... At the time, Levi didn't understand what she meant.

It was just a suit.

It was just a color.

How could it change one's vibe?

But as he sat amidst a sea of darkness and felt the deadpan atmosphere, he finally understood what she meant.

There was no ceremony, no music... only the howl of wind moving through the graves, casting one of the most depressive atmospheres he had ever experienced in his life.

They were waiting as well...

The living and the dead were waiting for one person.

The High Chancellor... Gideon Valemont.

A short elderly man with a hunched back stepped forward to speak... each step on the staircase towards the stage sent a sorrowful ripple in Levi's vision.

High Chancellor Valemont wore a traditional black funeral robe with black leather sandals and white socks.

Once he faced the crowd, he spoke... His voice was weary but composed.

"This land remembers every life lost here," he uttered. "Even if it's no longer part of Heliodor, these dead still belong to her... and to us."

He paused, glancing at the golden monolith in the distance.

"For every person we lay to rest today, many more stand behind them in memory... It is our duty to honor those who walked into the night so we might still see the day."

He lifted his wrinkled right hand slowly, fingers parted... index, middle, and ring fingers extended.

Sshshs...

The sound of fingers brushing against the fabric emitted harmoniously as everyone mirrored him in unison.

Then, the first tap echoed as fists struck chests.

"One for the Sun, who gave us light and shunned nightcrawlers into hiding..."

The second tap, softer but determined.

"One for the Moon, who watched over us when the Sun could not."

The third tap, softer, almost a whisper against the heart.

"And one for the stars, who guided our lost, and kept the pitch-black darkness away."

Then, the old bell above the monolith rang three times... The sound echoed through the fields, quieting the birds and stirring the banners.

Somewhere, a child sniffled, a mother wept, and a veteran poured a drink... Each person dealt with the grief in their own way.

This showed that there was no proper way to deal with grief... Whatever led us to acceptance and moving on was the right way.

The High Chancellor stepped down from the platform and turned to face the graves... Then, he waved his hand once... And an army of dog-like water elemental spirits manifested near each grave.

The weeping children stopped, their eyes caught in fascination at the cute elemental spirits lowering the tombs into the graves.

High Chancellor Valemont smiled kindly at some of the children in the front row.

"They're not truly gone..." he said softly, "They've just become the light we search for when the darkness returns... Auryn."

A whispered united "Aurn" resounded across the fields as everyone bowed their heads to the deceased...

Levi also bowed his head, but towards Melissa's, Omar's, Keira's, and Selene's graves.

"Instructor Seraphis was right... Our conflicts were truly petty." Jojo smiled bitterly, facing the same direction as Levi's.

Arthur, Rayan, and Nurah nodded in agreement, recalling how he said that they might dislike each other, but they're still on the same side.

"He was half-right..." Levi murmured, his tone low as he gazed at Demetris' empty grave.

Levi had no idea how the government dealt with the Bane family after both their sons were found to have conspired against the region, but... He knew one thing.

'Darius. Bishop. The Hound.'

Levi's spiritual eyes burned into the endless graves before him, his voice cold and unforgiving inside his mind... Then, he reinstated his original vow, this time with more zeal than ever.

'Let this vow be remembered by the dead... I shall not rest until each of you is broken and chained by Judgement's Chainstaff... forced to answer for what you've done.'

Unbeknownst to Levi, Lord Darius was already killed by the Bishop... Punished for the crime of self-ambition.

His list of targets was reduced to a mere two...

As for Sir Alaric? He was the sole mole caught alive... Though his survival was also a question since the brand could be ignited cross-dimensionally.

Although the list was theoretically narrowed to two targets... Levi had a long way to go before fulfilling his vow.

Meanwhile, as Ash'Kral floated on the bridge of darkness amongst a scattered gathering of contracted nightcrawlers, an ominous grin couldn't help but surface on his face.

'Twist him more for me... Only then will he have what it takes to fulfill my dream.'