

Evolution 271

Chapter 271: Nova Blades.

He exhaled slowly as he gripped his staff tighter... the twin crowns at both ends of his staff began to vibrate while turning brighter and brighter.

Then... whoosh!!

Two oppressive blades of concentrated sunflame were born, engulfing both crowns, each burning with radiant intensity that scorched the surrounding air!

This was Nova Blades, the first unlocked innate ability in his Junior rank evolutionary path of the Sun Seed... with more than a week, Levi had enough time to push through both Void and Sun seeds to the first stage... If it wasn't for him being accompanied by Feng Ling and his friends, he would have reached second stage through absorbing divine light.

But, this was good enough for now.

The golden sunflames stretched out like solid fire, shaping into dual, curved edges. Levi separated the staff down the middle. Then, he lifted the broken centerpiece and pressed it against the back of his neck.

He held onto the crimson chains tightly, rolling them twice on his hands until his grip was unquestionable.

The twin sunflame blades dangled a couple of meters away from him, making him appear like he was wielding kusarigama weapon.

Kraaaa!!!

The Phoenix saw the sunflame blades and didn't seem to care in the slightest... the concept of fear meant nothing before the Shadowlife Seed's hunger for sunlight that had taken over its mind.

Whoosh!!

With a flap of its wings, it took off in Levi's direction, its beak fully open... seeing this, Levi merely twirled the weapons, spinning them rapidly until two golden illuminating circles emerged on his sides.

Then he lowered into stance and gazed coldly at the fast-approaching Phoenix, resembling Kratos wielding the Blades of Chaos and seeking to slay a deity. The Phoenix roared and charged, its wings pushing the air nonstop akin to the wrath of a hurricane.

Yet, Levi was unfazed... the moment it came close enough, Levi uttered inwardly, "Explode."

BOOM! BOOM!!...

Every ignition mark he had placed before detonated at once!

A dozen explosions thundered across the sky, engulfing many parts of the Phoenix's body in an inferno of sunflames!

Feathers and glass shards scattered everywhere as the beast shrieked, losing control of its body midair... its focus switched from killing Levi to extinguishing the flames again.

However, Levi had no plans to give it more chances.

Whoosh!

With a burst of Combustion Leap, he blasted through the smoke like a blazing meteor... his Nova Blades dragging behind him and carving twin trails of sunlight.

Slice! Slice!

He crashed into the Phoenix's flank, slashing both blades upward in a brutal cross-cut... the twin strikes carved from shoulder to tip of its right wing, leaving deep, glowing lines that erupted with sunflames a second later!

The Phoenix howled and thrashed, its massive body losing rhythm mid-flight. Furious, it swung its head to snap at him, its beak carrying the power to pierce through Levi in one hit.

He knew this more than anyone else... the moment he spotted it, he vanished in a burst of green light... another Combustion Leap!

Then, he reappeared by its face, his blades already in motion, cutting down toward its eyes!

The Phoenix instinctively raised a wing to shield its face... but Levi anticipated this much, as he was gunning for its left wing from the very start.

He whipped both blades downward, the sunflames slicing through flesh and feather, creating a long, burning gash that bled with sizzling, steamy liquid!

Feeling the immense pain flooding its mind, the Phoenix tried to flee again, its instincts driving it toward the safety of the sand to heal up.

As it dove headfirst toward the desert, Levi refused to let it heal up again... he activated Sun Jets, twin blasts of radiant fire exploding from his boots, uncaring if his soles were going to be burnt off at the end of the fight.

Whoosh!

As Levi's body plummeted headfirst through the air at insane speed, he caught up to the Phoenix in no time. However, he knew that it was near impossible for him to attack it while they were both in a falling motion, as he couldn't swing his blades without having the insane air resistance eat most of the force.

'This is gonna suck...'

Instead, he started spinning rapidly while his arms remained extended, blades still burning at full power.

The Nova Blades started picking up his spinning speed in no time until the sunflames turned him into a spinning halo of light.

Levi aligned himself with the Phoenix's massive frame, falling parallel to it... the moment they met in midair, the real carnage began.

Slice! Slice! Slice!

Flames spiraled violently around him, forming expanding rings that tore outward in every direction, slicing through the Phoenix's battered body from feet to head!

It was like watching a fiery spiral fall from the heavens, slicing through feathers, flesh, bone, and anything in its way!

Kreeeee!!!

The Phoenix screamed in agony, its massive form squirming as it tried to escape, but Levi didn't stop... he kept spinning, cutting upward to downward, bottom to head, the heat so intense it twisted the surrounding air, leaving anyone viewing this scene from a distance to believe he fell victim to a mirage illusion.

By the time Levi reached its upper chest, the Phoenix's wings were absolutely shredded... torn, bleeding, and burning... resembling a plucked-out chicken.

With no feathers available, the Phoenix lost complete control over its body, dropping uncontrollably toward the desert.

BOOOM!

It crashed headfirst into a dune with a thunderous impact. The shockwave blew Levi off course midair... he tried to steady himself, but his balance was already questionable after spinning like a bey blade nonstop.

Knowing that he might not survive the fall in one piece, Levi swiftly decided to cut off the losses... instead of saving himself, he redirected his jets at the last second to blast sideways just as his body was about to smash into a dune. But he was still not in the clear as he shot across the desert like a skipping stone before smashing hard into a sand dune.

Thud! Thud! Thud!...

He tumbled violently, rolling over and over until he stopped at the base of a dune... his whole body ached... he could tell he had torn his muscles and broken a couple of bones.

"...Ugh." Levi spat sand mixed with blood, his voice hoarse. "That hurts..."

Although he was in immense pain from the fall and the overuse of Sun Jets, he swiftly reached out into his wallet and pulled a wooden bottle... he murmured the incantation and popped it open, letting the green liquid flow into his mouth.

The moment he felt the pain getting numbed down, he stood back up with great difficulty and used aetheric grasp to swiftly head back to the Phoenix.

He knew that the recovery totem acted as a mere painkiller and hadn't fixed his problems... but he couldn't afford to let the Phoenix remain buried in the sand for too long... its healing capabilities were too fearsome even while weakened.

The moment he arrived, Levi floated some distance away from the dying Phoenix... his breathing was ragged, his body beaten and somewhat numbed, but his spiritual eyes stayed fixed on the fallen creature.

He could see that its spiritual aura was dying off, representing that its subconscious barrier was at its weakest... the perfect time to carry on with his initial plan.

Slowly, he raised his hand... then he pointed his finger at the squirming Phoenix, which resembled a burnt-off turkey, and uttered calmly, "False Sun... devour its soul."

Once the order was given, Levi's body started emitting dark particles, resembling ghostly fireflies... they swiftly gathered in a single dot, which bent the surrounding light, turning darker and bigger until... a giant sphere of pure nothingness spread out behind Levi.

It swallowed everything... the sound of the wind, the movement of the sand, and even the dying breaths of the Phoenix... only heavy silence was allowed in its presence.

Then, Levi was left spooked at the sight of the Phoenix's body shaking nonstop, its eyes going wide as the pull reached it... the sphere behind Levi had turned into a massive black sun, and its pull was like a black hole.

The Phoenix's soul began to stir deep inside its subconscious barrier... it tried to hold on, but its subconscious barrier was already weak.

Kraaaaaa!!!

Cracks spread through it fast, glowing lines of light breaking across its body... the Phoenix screamed in hellish agony, feeling like someone caught its soul with their bare hands and was pulling it from its roots.

Fortunately for it... the pain didn't last long.

A huge wave of light burst out of its chest, but in Levi's spiritual eyes, he saw the Phoenix's corrupted soul trying its best to hold onto its body but to no avail.

It got pulled into the singularity, twisting and breaking apart as it was dragged in... the moment its presence was fully gone, the Phoenix's body lay there motionless, its wide-open crimson eyes gazing at the sky without any thought behind them.

Levi neither moved nor said anything... he kept gazing at the fallen Corrupted Phoenix, bathing in the silence of the desert.

'I thought you would be more excited.' Ash'Kral smiled, quite pleased with Levi's performance.

Although the Leviathan was more or less crippled and Levi wielded the greatest weapon against it, still... he won, and that's what mattered.

'I am, my face is just numbed up from the medicine.' Levi tried to smile, but he ended up with a twisted visage.

How could he not be excited? He had slain a Corrupted Leviathan outside the CRS Platform or the Nocturnal Ring.

This meant... he was entitled to harvest everything about it!

Chapter 272: A Crack.

'Good work, but you should heal up properly now...' The Titan advised, 'You can't afford to remain weakened in a foreign area.'

'I know... but, why haven't I felt anything in my soul?' Levi wondered while drinking a couple of recovery totems to heal his injuries, 'I don't think it has been enhanced with the Phoenix's soul.'

He thought that his spiritual prowess could be enhanced immensely, noticing it almost instantly... Instead, he felt nothing different.

'The Leviathan's soul is too rich for your soul to handle all at once.'

Ash'Kral spoke as he watched the Phoenix's soul trapped inside a giant black sphere within Levi's Spiritual Leywell. Its essence was slowly breaking apart and being drawn into Levi's soul, forming a long gray spiritual tether that connected them.

This sight resembled a black hole devouring a star, only in reverse, as Levi's soul was the one pulling from the False Sun.

'Makes sense.' Levi nodded in understanding.

He also had doubts about how the process would occur, since this was the first soul he had devoured through False Sun. He had wanted to test it before, but he couldn't afford to summon it when he wasn't alone for the past few days.

'I believe once the devouring process completes, my soul will be strong enough to handle the soul-split.' Levi wondered.

'Strong enough?' Ash'Kral chuckled, 'Boy, your soul will have fulfilled the condition by miles... it will have the strength necessary to survive the process while leaving your new three souls remaining at the first stage Solarbound rank.'

'That's what I like to hear.' Levi grinned, but his face only cracked a half-frozen grin, twitching uncontrollably.

Ash'Kral had told him that once the soul-split was complete, his main soul would weaken... after all, he was dividing it into three separate parts. That was why Levi planned to spend a good amount of time devouring souls afterward, to restore his strength to normal.

'Don't celebrate too soon... You just fulfilled the condition; the real problem is surviving the process alive.' The Titan reminded solemnly, 'I still can't imagine you surviving it with your current pain tolerance.'

Hearing this, a gloomy cloud manifested above Levi's head... each time he recalled that he needed to split his soul during the evolution process, his knees couldn't help but get weak.

As much as he hated to admit it, he also started to feel the same after what happened in the previous two evolutions... although he knew that the three seeds weren't going to give him a hard time during his evolution based on the pact they had. However, there wasn't much they could do about the pain resulting from the mutation.

He knew relying on totems or medicine to numb out the pain during the process was not an option... the moment he used them, the effects of the evolutionary formula would be impacted negatively, which might end up getting him killed during the process.

After all, perfect evolutionary formulas were called perfect for a reason... any type of external chemical reaction to the body would alter the formula, even if it was already consumed.

Hence, Daywalkers were warned to keep their bodies as clean as possible from anything external if they were going to use any type of evolutionary formulas.

'I will see what I can do to increase my pain tolerance before the process... for now, it's time to dig in.'

Levi swiftly threw those dark thoughts to the back of his mind and focused on the gigantic loot crate before him.

Although the Phoenix was corrupted and burnt all over, he knew that most of its body parts would fetch a noteworthy sum in the Boundless Expanse's markets... it might even pay him enough to kickstart his Leviathan-based shop at last.

'Slaying a Leviathan to kickstart a shop to sell their materials... how fitting.'

The Titan chuckled as he watched Levi use his harmonic spine to locate the most important and expensive part of the Leviathan... its crystallized Shadowlife seed!

Only in this case, Levi's harmonic spine didn't pick up on a crystallized spherical seed... instead, it was a crystallized mini tree that had its roots retracted back inside the seed, while the stem and the branches had their size reduced immensely.

As Levi scanned it, he couldn't help but marvel at its mysterious qualities, feeling like he was watching one of nature's greatest designs at work.

Without delay, he tapped into his aetheric grasp and gently guided it to a massive burnt-off cut... then, he widened the cut with aetheric hands and pulled it off in pristine condition.

Although he knew that Shadowlife seeds were indestructible, he still preferred being safe after noticing how thin the crystallized blue branches were.

Once it landed in his hands, Levi felt that its weight was nothing like any other crystallized gemstone he held... it might be as small as any other Shadowlife seed, but it weighed at least ten times.

"For it to turn into a crystallized miniature tree, it means its growth has reached the limit of a Mature Tree... so, this Leviathan was technically at the evolution stage of Solarbound rank."

Levi was left amazed... while he knew that Beast Races were bestowed with strength much larger compared to most races at the same growth level, considering the trade-off being intelligence, he didn't think that it would be at the evolution stage already.

This didn't shine Levi's strength in a new light... sure, he fought incredibly well, but it only highlighted just how potent the abilities were.

If the Leviathan had access to even a single ability, the fight might have ended very differently... one use of its weakest power alone could have brought ruin to entire cities.

However, without abilities, dominion, access to spiritual aura, or even proper bestial intelligence that wasn't corrupted, it became nothing more than a giant punching bag.

Soon, Levi stored the crystallized seed in his wallet and returned to desiccating the Phoenix's organs, knowing that he didn't have time to waste.

His teammates were still in the capital, and he was close to a hundred kilometers away from it... Without proper communication tools, anything could be happening.

If it wasn't for his great confidence in his team's capabilities without him, he would be worried sick by now... still, it was better to return early, understanding that their situations were different.

While he was confident in them carrying out his plan safely, the same couldn't be said about him dealing with a Leviathan... if he didn't return as fast as he could, they would start assuming the worst.

This would lead to them ditching his plan of meeting up in the pyramid, searching for him across the desert.

'Ash'Kral, what's the most expensive organ of a Leviathan Phoenix?' Levi inquired while manifesting a single Nova Blade on his staff, planning to use it as a knife.

The Phoenix might be dead, but its flesh and organs were still too tough for him to cut into using anything besides sunflames.

'Well... your Phoenix is fully corrupted, which has ruined the initial value of most of its organs.' Ash'Kral said calmly, 'What makes Leviathan's body parts be considered treasures for many is their insane vitality, added to some perks each organ has. However, the corruption has killed off their vitality and ruined most of their perks that are a must for some potion concoctions and such... still, harvest everything in sight. A Corrupted Leviathan Phoenix is incredibly rare and possesses immense collectible value.'

'I see... I know corruption is a plague, but can't those organs be used for at least concoctions of potions related to the Shadow dimension's creatures?' Levi wondered, 'Like me... is there any part I can use for my future Void Seed evolutionary formulas?'

'Boy, don't confuse Void Seed with the Shadow dimension or its corruption... they are two separate things entirely, as much as Void Seed's sources of energy are based on darkness, void, and such.' Ash'Kral shot down his thought.

'Ah... I assumed as much.'

Although Levi knew it was a long shot, he still asked. He recognized that Sun and Void-based materials would be harder and harder to obtain as he kept growing. So, he couldn't afford to miss anything that could be of use.

'Well, as long as it pays for my shop, I don't care how they are use...'

Levi suddenly froze, feeling like something shifted in the air... it was subtle, but he could see his painted world of frequencies twitching for no reason.

But then... he heard it.

Crkkk... krkkk...

The sound was vague, almost like thin ice breaking under pressure, except it came from everywhere at once... the sky, the surrounding sand, the air, everything wiggled as if touched by invisible waves.

With his harmonic spine's insane detection skills, he could see the peculiar waves messing up his audible vision.

Levi knitted his eyebrows... his instincts warned him before his mind could catch up. That sound... It wasn't thunder, it wasn't air... it was the dimensional membrane fracturing even more!

Before he could get a confirmation from Ash'Kral, another sharp crack resounded in his ears like glass fracturing under the ocean.

Then silence. No wind. No sound. Just the aftertaste of that dreadful crack still ringing in his mind.

Levi's grip on his weapon tightened, realizing that they had gotten a bit too loose with using their powers, forgetting themselves to be inside a fractured dimensional site.

"...This doesn't sound good," Levi uttered solemnly as he kept gazing at the pitch-black sky in his vision, feeling like he could see the dimensional membrane having millions of tiny fractures.

If the combined use of his abilities, his friends', and the others' had already caused two cracks, he could tell... their time inside the site was running out.

Chapter 273: She Has Social Anxiety.

While Levi was hastily harvesting the Leviathan Phoenix's organs and other important materials, his teammates had already made it to the Great Pyramid of Dawn safely.

They had relied on Jasmine to help them teleport away from Arthur's vermillion fortress... they left behind the same illuminating tree that Levi used in Grave'Maw's expedition inside the fortress.

With its illuminating light piercing through the vermillion walls, the Corrupted armies didn't even notice Jasmine and the others emerging from a portal thirty meters away from them.

As the Corrupted were busy scratching the vermillion gemstone walls, they made it to the gigantic, shadowy pyramid and sealed shut the door behind them.

Of course, every ounce of energy wasted to save them was paid back through Growth Totems from the other two teams.

Tyrese and Evangeline didn't even haggle or complain... the fact that they came to save them was a massive favor, and those growth totems still ain't cutting it... that's why Levi told them to insist that the Sun Amulet would return with his party.

This time, Tyrese and Evangeline had a slight issue with it, but they still agreed again. How could they reject when Levi was still nowhere to be seen?

They could see from Arthur and his friends' expressions that they were waiting for them to say no... ooh, they would have vented all of their distress and concern that was eating them away.

Right now, everyone was waiting near a vermillion wall that was used to close the Pyramid's shattered gate... waiting for none other than Levi.

"Shouldn't we take advantage and explore the Pyramid while it's empty and the Corrupted are occupied?" Mira uttered calmly.

Most of the Corrupted assaulting them had poured out of the pyramid, which left them somewhat relieved that it wasn't heavily guarded anymore.

"Who's holding you back?" Arthur replied coldly while waving his hand dismissively, "Go, we aren't leaving here until Levi returns."

"No need to get irritated... I am just saying." Mira shrugged, "If Levi were here, I am certain he wouldn't think it's smart to waste our time instead of searching for treasures and the Sun Amulet... didn't you just tell us that the entire planet might be contaminated, and we have until Dawn before the Ashfall plague awakens?"

Although it sounded insensitive, from a rational point of view, she was right... Arthur and his friends knew this as well, since Levi had explicitly told them to follow the trail of the map and raid the treasury even if he wasn't around.

As much as they were worried about Levi, he assured them that he would return, and they trusted his words more than anything else.

'How can we get them to leave us alone without raising any suspicion?' Shia frowned inwardly, annoyed that both teams were still sticking to them like glue.

They made it look like they were waiting for Levi, but in reality, they wanted them to grow impatient and leave them alone... only then could they seek out the treasury.

They had no plans to take them too... saving them was one thing, but sharing their treasures was another.

Unfortunately...

"I will bring shame to my family's name if I leave to search for treasures while knowing that someone was out there, fighting for his life because he decided to help us," Evangeline uttered solemnly as she gazed at Mira.

"Likewise!"

"I ain't moving until Heliodor's Raiders captain joins us."

"It's basic honor... if you had any, we wouldn't have been put in this situation in the first place."

Evangeline's troops backed her up, akin to royal knights; their irked stares were affixed on Tyrese's teammates.

Hearing this, Nurah and her friends were more annoyed than Tyrese's teammates... they didn't think that having Evangeline's strong morals on their side would be their downfall.

Now, as long as Evangeline's team refused to move, Tyrese and his people would feel like assholes if they were the only ones to head in.

Shia, Nurah, Jojo, Jasmine, and Arthur traded glances in silence... without words, they communicated with their eyes and brows, seemingly asking each other to come up with something to get rid of them.

Alas, it wasn't as easy as it seemed without raising suspicion.

'What would Levi have done if he were here...' Arthur held his chin thoughtfully, trying to pry into Levi's mind.

He had been hanging around him for a very, very long time now... as much as Arthur hated studying, it didn't mean that he learned nothing from being around Levi and his struggles with the nightcrawlers.

'When he returns, he can use his echolocation to detect our positions... if he finds us in the throne chamber together, he will most definitely assume that we haven't collected the treasury successfully... then, he will leave the Sun Amulet to us while he collects the treasures!'

'Holy shit, I am a genius!' Arthur's eyes gleamed, feeling like he had an eureka moment.

But, just as he opened his mouth, wanting to take the lead, Jasmine summoned her brush and turned the ground into a scroll. Then, she manifested a portal.

Before anyone could react or ask her what she was doing, she stepped inside and closed it behind her.

"..."

"..."

"..."

While Arthur was left speechless with the rest of Tyrese's and Evangeline's teammates, Nurah and the girls had a faint smirk.

The conversation they had with their eyes had led to Jasmine ditching everyone to seek out the treasury alone... with her ability to portal all over the pyramid, no one could catch up or figure out her position.

It was like they came to an understanding that it was the best solution at the moment... Jasmine could handle herself alone, while they would either remain here waiting for Levi or head to the throne chamber to collect the Sun Amulet... either case, they would secure both the treasury and the Sun Amulet.

The only downside was:

"What was that?" Evangeline frowned, her reaction shared by everyone.

"Don't mind her." Nurah sighed, "She has social anxiety due to her deafness... she can't handle a big crowd in tight areas."

"Fret not, she will return." Jojo nodded in support, "She just needs some time alone to unwind."

"What they said..." Shia remarked while chewing a bubble gum with her arms resting behind her head.

"..."

Arthur stared at his friends with parted lips, watching them organize a lie and support each other without an ounce of hesitation like they practiced it before... the happiness he felt of coming up with his own strategy died out akin to a candle being blown off.

It wasn't like he had a bad idea, but the girls preferred handling it by themselves, so when Levi did arrive, he'd group up with them, and they could take it off from there.

"Social anxiety? That monster? Heh, I wasn't born yesterday." Tyrese snickered in amusement, "I had a feeling that something was off about your adamant desire to stay behind... I knew Levi isn't foolish to order you to wait for him despite the circumstances... now I know... you must have found a map to the treasury in the letter you told us about. He can't ask you to destroy the Sun Amulet without putting a map of the Pyramid to guide you... but, you can't head to the treasury with us still around. Smart, I would have done the same."

"We don't know what you're talking about." Nurah tilted her head in playful confusion.

Deny, deny, deny.

The girls had no intentions to agree to anything since they knew that he had no proof... also, they discerned that Tyrese or Evangeline would have called out their bullshit, and they still committed.

After all, the moment Jasmine pulled two teleportations, she would be off their radar and whether they knew or not wouldn't matter anymore... still, it was better to deny the allegations to maintain the upper hand.

Tyrese chuckled after realizing that they weren't going to admit to it... he looked at Arthur and said casually, "Ponytail, mind leading the way to the throne chamber? We have a Sun Amulet to retrieve."

"But bosh... what about the treasury?" Blake whispered near Tyrese's ear with a lisp.

"The treasury stores the empire's treasures... but, I am certain we will find some corruption-based treasures in the throne chamber." Tyrese smiled, not bothered in the slightest by their schism.

Chapter 274: Your Burden is Now... Mine.

Tyrese understood that without a map, finding the treasury inside the Pyramid was going to take days if not more... the Pyramid was at least five times bigger than Khufu.

With the threat of Ashfall hanging above their heads like a judgment sword, he couldn't afford to split his party from Arthur and the girls... they were the only ones with a map, and he preferred getting to the throne chamber at least to search for artifacts and other treasures born out of the Shadow dimension's corruption-twisting nature.

So, although the situation sucked for them, he had no interest in whining or giving Levi's team a hard time about it... the fact that they were still active in the site was thanks to them, and he wasn't one to forget someone's goodwill.

As for Evangeline and her teammates? Their eyelids kept twitching, feeling like their good morals were being wasted on a bunch of sly pricks... who wanted them gone the second they entered the pyramid.

"Please lead the way."

She uttered with an irked expression; if it wasn't for getting saved by them, she would have been less tolerant of their shenanigans.

In her eyes, if they came clean to her, neither she nor her teammates would have touched a single treasure from the treasury even if they accompanied them.

That's how strong her sense of honor was... but how could Arthur and the girls trust her? In front of true riches, even the strongest-willed shall be tested.

"Cough, on second thought, I believe Levi will be fine on his own."

Shia manifested a saved-up, minimized holographic picture of the map and led the way. Nurah chased after her with a faint giggle after noticing everyone's lips twitching in annoyance.

Tyrese chuckled and followed their lead, not weirded out by Shia leading the way without a map in hand.

He knew that all of them had access to offline services of Neuralens like recording, taking pictures, and such... however, they couldn't share the holograms, which was the main reason Levi's team couldn't communicate with Jasmine.

As for the data? It would remain in the Neuralens device until a connection was established with the network on Earth.

While Jasmine, Levi, and the others were going through their own quests, they had no clue a harrowing situation was developing next to the fallen Grave'Maw's nest.

The Hound.

Seraphis' golden shimmering spiritual tree was already riddled with small cracks all over... but, as the supervising officers gazed at it closely, their expressions turned grim after noticing that the cracks were suddenly increasing at an alarming rate.

"Shit... the Hound is getting close to devouring Sir Seraphis' spiritual tree." One of them uttered gloomily, "Let's get out of here and report it."

Without hesitation, they summoned their mounts and swiftly cleared the area, understanding that the moment the Hound left the Rift of Binding Laws, he would start with them... but first, they sent a warning to the High Chancellor.

...

Meanwhile, inside the Rift of Binding Laws, which was drenched in blood and silence, the Hound sat still upon a golden throne in the center.

He was still surrounded by the endless sea of crimson water and the thick stench of iron and rot belonging to thousands of corpses floating across its surface.

He had his head lowered, eyes closed... his expression unreadable... he had been in this state ever since the day he fought against Seraphis, his buttocks affixed to the throne.

But suddenly, the still reflection of his hideous face was ruined by a slow ripple on the waters... the ripples started increasing in volume bit by bit until the entire sea of blood transformed into a raging sea, rotting corpses hurled everywhere, but not a single one dared to enter the throne's vicinity.

Then... snap!

The Hound's eyes opened... they were fully blood-red before, but now? A tint of golden hue was seen in them.

His sealed shut eyes opened for the first time since that day, exposing a yellowish set of hound-like teeth. Then, he spoke, his voice echoing through the Rift.

"Fallen king... the burden that crippled you, the weight that made you forsake the struggles of your own people..." He paused, his gaze cold, "... is now mine, and I deem it unworthy of turning a blind eye on us."

As he slowly rose from the throne, the bloody water shook violently even more... waves surged upward, swallowing the golden seat whole until it vanished beneath the surface. Then, the entire Rift quivered as if recognizing a new sovereign.

Before him stood the great Tree of Pride, its golden roots trembling under the pull of the crimson flood... the blood climbed its trunk, soaking into the bark until the gold dulled and turned dark red.

Its branches twisted and writhed wildly, intertwining with the stem and roots, breaking and merging until the entire tree condensed into a single, blood-soaked crown with thorny edges.

The crown floated through the air, droplets of red dripping from its edges as it drifted toward him... gently, it settled atop the Hound's head.

Behind him, his own Crimson Tree... the manifestation of his Aspect... shook hard before growing even larger, its roots digging deep into the sea of blood below.

Then, a new golden fruit was born from its branches... The Fruit of Pride.

It was hanging at the very top of the crimson tree, glowing with a dull yellowish light that made it stand out from everything else around it.

Its surface was smooth and reflective like polished glass, with thin purple veins running across it... the veins squirmed once in a while as if the fruit was alive. It was shaped like an upside-down heart, with a sharp tip at the bottom and a thick stem connecting it to the branch.

Its existence felt weird while attached to the crimson tree... anyone would instantly point out that it didn't belong there, like seeing an orange tree give birth to an apple.

Illogical... yet, this was the reality of the universe's power system that was born out of Shadowlife seeds.

Under the laws of the Shadowlife seeds, anyone entering the Rift of Binding Laws risked their lives by offering their mature spiritual tree to be devoured... subjected to a spiritual trial shaped entirely by the tree's own laws.

However, not many presented the chance as they would rather die inside the Rift than allow their powers, hard work, and everything they had gone through to be earned by their enemy.

Seraphis was the same as them... in fact, it was tougher for him since his pride would never let him do this.

But, when his students' lives or death were involved, nothing else mattered but their safety... even if it meant putting everything on the line to be won if it bought them time to survive the Hound's wrath... if it wasn't for him committing to it, Levi and the others might not be alive today.

Alas... everything that Seraphis had spent a lifetime building with his Shadowlife seed now belonged to the Hound after succeeding in the spiritual trial through a process called Knowledge Transfer.

This process was accessible only to owners of Mature Trees and Dominions... it was also the only exception allowed to grow the Shadowlife seed without an evolutionary formula or sunlight, since everything about the target's seed was devoured: stored sunlight used to grow the seed, personal library, knowledge, everything besides the weapons and the mutations!

In other words...

"I never thought my breakthrough to the Blazewarden rank would come through the fallen king's downfall..." The Hound said coldly, his fingers brushing against the bloody crown resting on his head. "But so be it. A man who's forsaken his own pride has no right to command such powerful laws."

Then, with a single thought... the Rift of Binding Laws collapsed, and the Hound emerged from the cracked golden tree, a single step forward enough to shatter it into light particles.

"Slaughter and Pride..." He muttered, lifting his gaze toward the bright sky. A faint, cold smile manifested on his face as he added, "Seraphis... you won't find peace in the afterlife. The world shall know real pain... because of you."

Chapter 275: The Cycle Concluded.

The first thing the Hound did after tasting his freedom was to inform the Bishop. He sent him a message, telling him that he was freed and that he had broken through to the Blazewarden rank by devouring Seraphis' seed.

Hearing this while sitting on his throne, the Bishop cracked a faint shadowy smile. Still, he didn't offer a single word of praise.

'Took you long enough.' He ordered calmly, 'Now, head to the ancient site's location and find a way in... I've received information that the site is connected to the Ashora Empire. There might be a chance that the Sun Amulet is still there.'

'Sun Amulet?'

'I'll send you the details on your way... head there quickly, the site's gate should be open by now.'

The Bishop's access to information about this mission was greatly limited since he had no one inside the circle that was sent. As for sending his own people? He knew the SAS Headquarters must have sent at least a Solarbound Daywalker to guard the site.

He couldn't send anyone that was part of the Duskbound Order due to the CRS Platform's rules.

The Hound was one of his personal dogs, unrelated to the Duskbound Order, which was the reason he had been waiting for him to emerge.

'As you wish.'

No questions asked, the Hound fixed his direction to the northeast, facing the rubble of Grave'Maw's mountain. Then, he took a deep breath and bent his immense, tightened muscular thighs until his knees were about to touch the ground.

With his arms strapped tightly to the sides, akin to an asylum fugitive, he looked like he was about to crash headfirst into the ground. Yet, he didn't lose balance at all.

"Fallen king... let's have a taste of your powers."

The Hound let out a long exhale, his breath appearing as smoke escaping from the holes in his muzzle. Then, in a cold tone, he uttered, "Unstoppable Pride."

Immediately after, his deathly gray skin started glowing with a golden light until his entire body resembled a statue crafted from pure gold. As for his wild blood-red hair? It kept its luster, mixing with the golden hue, making it glow orange like it was set ablaze.

The Hound fixed his cruel gaze on the ruined mountain in front of him... and then he lunged.

BOOOOOM!!

The mountain shook hard before a loud crack split it open. The Hound pierced through the rocks and boulders, breaking through the stone like it was made of foam!

It didn't matter if a boulder was fifty meters thick or not—nothing could block his path, as the ability he used fed on his prideful belief that nothing could stop him!

The moment he hesitated or doubted himself, the enhancements would fade. But that thought never crossed the Hound's mind for even a second!

Rumble!!

Dust and rubble flew everywhere as the mountain grumbled and began to fall apart the instant he emerged on the other side, headfirst!

Yet, the golden glow only grew brighter as he kept moving, each step smashing the dirt and sending cracks across the land!

His speed kept rising until a thunderous boom echoed behind him... the sound barrier breaking!

Rumble!! Rumble!!

He tore through forests, shattered trees, and sliced through lakes without slowing down, his speed only climbing higher. Nothing could block his path... not even the strongest mountains ahead!

He was like a wild beast with a single purpose in mind... fulfilling the Bishop's order.

While the Hound was swiftly gaining ground, getting closer and closer to the fallen Sphinx's region, High Chancellor, Hicham, Idriss, and Madam Ysara were gathered at a classified underground facility in Heliodor's region.

The moment they received news of the Hound being freed, they headed straight to the medical room, where Seraphis was kept alive... barely.

But now, all of them stood with somber expressions as they gazed at Seraphis, who was stored inside a standing metallic silver pod with a glass window.

He was frozen solid, fully nude, but his lower body was hidden. The glass window showed only his upper part. Although he was in a cryonic state, his appearance still looked like an old man in his final hours.

"So soon... how did the Hound survive Seraphis' spiritual trial? I didn't think it would kill him, but succeeding in a couple of months?" Hicham asked with a deep sigh.

"The target of the spiritual trial matters the most..." the High Chancellor smiled bitterly. "The Hound and Seraphis shared a rich ancient past. Neither of them would have accepted losing the spiritual trial of their nemesis."

Although none of them had gone through the spiritual trial of devouring one's seed since it was extremely rare, they could tell that the Hound's personal vendetta had played a significant role.

That was because those trials might be spiritual, but they weren't for the soft-hearted in the slightest. After all, besides the Daywalker and the Nightcrawler, even the Shadowlife seed fought for itself to survive being devoured and turned into a mere fruit for another Shadowlife tree.

Shadowlife seeds were indestructible... a single seed could pass through the hands of hundreds of partners in its lifetime before one of them survived the evolutionary ordeal and reached the limit.

This meant the only way to eliminate a Shadowlife seed from existence was to have it devoured by another, concluding its cycle.

Each Shadowlife seed was believed to have two wills: a will to survive at all costs and a will to evolve at all costs.

Hence, the spiritual trials threatened its survival, which meant it would do anything in its power to make the enemy suffer.

"So... what now?" Lord Idriss asked, his eyes slightly bloodshot as he gazed at his friend. "Seraphis isn't dying on our watch."

"Idriss..."

The High Chancellor and the others looked in his direction with lips slightly parted, wanting to speak but failing to find the words.

In the end, Madam Ysara handled it with a straightforward tone. "Idriss, he's dead... You know it, and we know it."

"No." Idriss rejected it.

He stepped toward the medical pod and placed his hands on the glass, staring at his old friend of many, many years.

A friend he had fought beside through countless battles.

A friend who had saved his life more times than he could count...and whom he had saved just as many.

A friend who stood with him when everyone else turned away.

Yet, he was being told that he was dead? To make it worse, he died because Idriss involved him in a mission without sharing its full details.

Although he did it for the sake of Heliodor's citizens... to save them from a mole plotting the region's downfall... it didn't matter at the moment.

It was all an excuse to dull the guilt, and he knew it.

Seraphis died because of him.

He died because Idriss killed him.

That's how Idriss saw it.

How could he accept that? How could he accept that he was the one who killed his friend?

"No... there must be a way... must be, it can't end like this for him..."

Idriss tightened his fist until his veins bulged, and the surrounding air seemed to twist. He was bad at expressing emotion, but everyone could see... Idriss was beyond heartbroken.

He was shattered inside and out.

His face might look solemn, but the pain and grief in his eyes could never be fully hidden.

"His Shadowlife seed was devoured..." Madam Ysara said.

She didn't explain, but that single sentence was enough to shatter Idriss' heart into pieces... along with the delusion he was clinging to.

He could refuse to admit it a hundred times, but the result would stay the same. Anyone with a Shadowlife seed was pronounced dead the instant their seed was taken from their body by any means.

They were indestructible, which gave seed holders a chance to survive if they were stabbed or gravely wounded. But once the seed was removed, it was over.

After all, the Shadowlife seeds were bound to the soul... removing or devouring one was the same as tearing a Daywalker's soul out.

In Seraphis' case, his body might be frozen, but they could all see it with their own eyes.

He had no spiritual aura.

He had no soul.

He was nothing but a frozen corpse.

He was...Dead.

Chapter 276 Enough is Enough.

Idriss turned his back on Seraphis and slid down, sitting on the cold floor, his back resting against the side of the medical pod.

Idriss stared at him for a long while, then let out a soft exhalation.

"You always looked untouchable... even now, frail, old, and weak... still, your expression is unchanged."

He spoke under his breath, his mind drifting back... to the night they first met.

They were about the same age as Levi's generation... around eighteen years old. He could still remember the air reeking of rot and blood in the depths of a Midnight Dominion nest that wasn't part of the CRS Platform.

He remembered the panic, the screams, the swarm that surrounded him and his party... back then, Seraphis wasn't a king, nor a noble.

Just another mercenary hired with a cold gaze and an aura of immense pride... Idriss hated him at the time, thinking that his pride was too overbearing, which made his ego too hard to deal with as the party's captain.

However, his impression of him changed when he had been pinned down, bleeding, weak, awaiting a certain death mere seconds away... until Seraphis appeared out of the smoke, his golden shimmering blade slicing through the swarm of nightcrawlers like light through fog.

"Get up," Seraphis had said back then, hand stretched out for the boy, who hated his guts and didn't hesitate to call him for it, "You die when the job's done... not before."

Idriss smiled faintly at the memory, his lips shaking a bit... he looked at his peers in front of him and said, "After that mission, I never walked away from Seraphis' side... I told my father I wanted to become an international mercenary to sharpen myself, and he allowed me, just like I allowed my eldest son to go seek his own path."

"We fought across borders, across worlds even, carrying out one mission after another... we weren't soldiers. We were Daywalkers... mercenaries who lived by the job and nothing else."

"You know what happened next."

"Grave'Maw's invasion." High Chancellor uttered solemnly.

Idriss nodded, smiling bitterly... he remembered the day he received a call that his region was being invaded. At the time, he was on a different continent altogether, but still, he tried his best to return and offer his assistance.

Seraphis didn't hesitate to come with him, but alas... the war was won, but Idriss' father had fallen that day, defending their region while Idriss was still on the way.

That's when he decided... he could no longer roam the world. He needed to carry on the torch; he must take his father's place and make his legacy live on.

When he left the mercenary world, Seraphis returned to his region as well... the mercenary now a prince once more.

They met again many times, and Idriss even saved Seraphis when his region was under invasion from the Bishop's personal dogs... but his region had fallen, and his royal family was slaughtered.

This happened when Seraphis was already suffering from losing both his wife and only daughter during his ruling... so, he had nothing left in life but his broken pride.

No family, no home, nothing... he was suicidal, and if it wasn't for Idriss bringing him to his region and giving him a job to teach newborn Daywalkers, he would have kicked the bucket years ago.

Now, years later, Idriss betrayed his friend's trust, knowing that he couldn't sacrifice the only thing he still cared about... his students.

Yet, he still pushed him to join them in the mission, knowing that he was the only one capable of helping them without raising Darius' suspicion.

It was all planned to limit risks.

It was for a good cause.

It was their job to protect their citizens, who were living in a safe bubble and had no clue just how harsh the outside world was.

Yet... Idriss felt like he was the biggest piece of shit in the history of humanity, feeling like he had sacrificed his friend for the sake of their region.

His friend, who had already lost everything and had nothing else but his instructor job... even then, he didn't let him retire in peace as Seraphis always wanted.

"What have I done..."

Idriss lowered his head in silence... he wasn't crying, but droplets were falling from his chin and landing on the ground softly.

Was it raining? Who could tell...

Hicham, Madam Ysara, and the High Chancellor had never seen Idriss in such a vulnerable state.

He was the man, the toughest out there, one of the most respected Daywalkers in Northern District, the one to spill dread in the hearts of nightcrawlers, and yet... here he was, a human eaten by grief, just like the rest of them.

If Seraphis were to die an honorable death... he wouldn't have reacted like this; he would have been the proudest out there, as it was a dream of theirs to die a warrior's death.

But, how could he feel proud when he was the one putting his friend in a death sentence... at the time, he didn't know it was going to get that badly, but still... it changed nothing.

"Idriss... you're being too hard on yourself, and you know it." High Chancellor sighed, "Seraphis went down with a fight... he went down for his students to live, for our region to continue prospering... what he failed to achieve with his own nation, he succeeded with us. I am certain, if he were awake now, even for a few moments, he would tell you that he has no regrets."

"No regrets?" Idriss scoffed in derision without looking at them, "Four of his students have perished, and one of them has defected to the other side because we involved them in the expedition."

Before anyone could respond, Idriss stood up and faced them with a cold expression... his eyes were bloodshot, but not a single tear was seen in them.

Then, he uttered, "I'm no child who needs comforting... I know what I did. I know what we did. I know this is the life of Daywalkers... death follows every step we take. I've seen it more than anyone else."

He turned around and looked up at Seraphis' frozen, wrinkled face, his jaw tightening. "But that doesn't make it right. So many died just so our plan could work... all because we weren't strong enough. Our weakness pulls death toward everyone around us... friends, allies, even those who trust us. And now..."

His voice went low, almost breaking, "Now, you're paying the price for our weakness, for my weakness... all over again."

"And what are you going to do about it?" Madam Ysara asked calmly.

"What else?" Idriss said coldly, "The Hound, the Bishop, and all of his f*cking dogs are going to die under my hands... and I will seek through it regardless of what it takes, even if it means returning to the Nocturnal Ring."

"Easy now... no need to involve that death trap." Hicham warned solemnly, "All of us know the kind of monsters are joining that platform... it was hard, but doable at the beginning ranks, but the Baron rank is not a fun place to be. You barely made it out alive the last time, and you swore never to set foot in it again... for the region, for your family, for yourself."

Idriss turned around and looked straight at Hicham's charming prince-like face... then, he responded coldly, "It has to be done... someone has to, and I have no plans on putting this burden on our children's shoulders alone."

"If I die, I die... but, they have caused too much terror and heartbreak... enough is enough."

With those lasting words, Idriss left the chamber... his mind already made up.

Seeing him leave like this, the High Chancellor and the others remained quiet for a few moments, understanding that Idriss had been hit the hardest with Seraphis' death.

Yet, this wasn't even the biggest of their concerns.

"What are we going to do about the kids?" Hicham smiled wryly, "They had done everything in their power to get into the ancient site to find a miracle medicine to save Seraphis... they will be absolutely heartbroken to hear that he is gone."

"Let's pray for their safe return first... we can deal with the aftermath then."

The High Chancellor clasped his hands behind his back, eyes fixed on Seraphis. Then he said, "If you think the Bishop is going to let us walk away after what he did to him, you have no idea what kind of man he is... he holds grudges forever."

"What are you saying?"

"We have to prepare for the worst..." The High Chancellor uttered solemnly, "The Bishop is going to target us again, and this time... he is going to make sure we know our place."

Chapter 277: A Bad Feeling.

"He can't make a move personally without the risk of breaking the unofficial treaty between them and the Saviors... but he will definitely send his dogs to get rid of our region like he did to Seraphis' region," the High Chancellor said solemnly. "Because his dogs aren't part of the Duskbound Order, he will deny it, and the Saviors will bow their heads and accept it to maintain world balance as long as possible."

"How bothersome..." Madam Ysara massaged her eyelids. "If only getting rid of his dogs outside the region's borders was an option... we could have hunted them down one by one."

"It is what it is... the Bishop is seeking just an excuse to break the treaty while having the upper hand. We can't hand it to him on a silver plate and damn our region," Hicham sighed.

Heliodor's Upper Echelon weren't idiots... they understood that the best opportunity to eliminate the Hound was by ambushing him while he was still trapped in Seraphis' dominion.

However, it wasn't as simple as it seemed.

Since the Blood Hunters Agency was the one invading Grave'Maw's territory, what the Hound did in the expedition would be spun as self-defense for the Bishop's assets... after all, Grave'Maw was one of his many pawns across the continent.

This meant, unless the Hound invaded their region and fought him inside the borders, they would never have the Saviors' or SAS Headquarters' support when dealing with the Bishop's wrath.

The High Chancellor and the rest of the Councilmen would never give the Bishop a proper excuse to invade their region with the strength of his Eternal Empire.

Seraphis had done so and paid the price dearly, finding no one on his side but the Morningstar family during the invasion... as for his region's guardians? They gave up on them without putting up a fight, using the excuse that he was the one aggravating the Bishop and his empire.

In simpler terms... it was all politics.

A game of sheep and coyotes, with everyone having to show that they were the sheep to avoid being dealt with as a coyote.

What happened to coyotes daring to invade farms to hunt the sheep? Shot on the spot.

"Sigh... this is the life of all the weak and decent regions... their citizens are considered nothing more than a breeding zone for livestock." Hicham smiled bitterly. "No one truly on our side... it's all about making a profit from us... the Saviors farm crystallized seeds with our efforts, with a false promise of protection, while the Eternal Empires allow us to exist to keep on reproducing and feed them our light. Once we try to step out of our 'roles', we get erased."

The High Chancellor and Madam Ysara went silent... they had already accepted their truth as much as they hated it.

They knew that they were living to survive as long as it took or until the day their planet was fully consumed by the Shadow Dimension... nothing more, nothing else.

The moment they tried to change their fate, both the Saviors and the Conquerors would make an example of them, just like the many other fallen regions across the world.

Just as the High Chancellor was about to comment, Madam Ysara received a dimensional message from one of the many scouts she had on her payroll across the world.

-The Hound has been spotted heading to the far east... he is nearing the borders of Peria's region.-

Madam Ysara frowned for a moment in confusion, and then it hit her... the only major thing happening to the far east of their region was the exploration of the Ancient Distorted Site!

"The Hound is heading to Sphinx's region," she reported swiftly to her peers.

Hearing this, both the High Chancellor and Hicham raised an eyebrow in surprise. They expected the Hound to return to his master's side, waiting for his next order. They didn't expect that the order was already given, and it was related to the Ancient Site.

"He doesn't know... the Bishop doesn't know that Dominic is supervising the exploration personally."

Hicham's eyes gleamed for a split second, realizing that the Bishop's source of vital classified information was killed cold after they got rid of Darius.

He was certain that he lacked the details because if he knew that Dominic was there, he wouldn't have dared to send the Hound... even when he had broken through the Blazewarden rank.

After all, Dominic was an Ecliptic Daywalker... the Hound had no chance against him.

"If you're thinking about having Dominic kill the Hound, don't get your hopes up," Madam Ysara uttered indifferently. "Dominic cares about nothing more than the world's stability and keeping this frail balance alive between the three factions... even if it means allowing the Hound to walk free."

"I know... but we are allowed to dream, right?" Hicham showed a weak smile.

None of them were worried about Levi and the rest, understanding that while Dominic wouldn't actively kill the Hound, he would most definitely end him if he dared to get close to the Ancient Site.

Sure, he cared about the world's stability, but within reason.

"I will update Feng Ling... meanwhile, call back your troops from overseas... we need all the manpower in our hands once the Bishop channels his anger on our region," the High Chancellor ordered calmly while stepping out of the medical chamber.

"What about Seraphis?" Hicham asked.

"Leave him to rest in peace... we will hold a funeral once the children return."

He said, shaking his head in helplessness, feeling like he was getting older by the second in this cruel world of theirs...

Meanwhile, inside the Ancient Distorted Site...

Levi was seen finishing up harvesting the most important organs of the Leviathan Phoenix in his dimensional wallets, having no clue about the turmoil happening on Earth.

"I have filled up four dimensional wallets already and this thing still keeps on giving..."

Levi wiped his sweaty forehead with his sleeve; a faint pleased smile was planted on his face.

"It was really a good decision to rent a few more dimensional wallets from Nocturn's Heart Market."

Although the High Council had given them a temporary three extra dimensional wallets for the sake of not running out of space when gathering treasures, Levi decided to add personal ones from the Boundless Expanse.

Since he wasn't sure if he would need them when he already had four dimensional wallets on hand, he decided to just rent them for a month... in this manner, he would have additional free space at a cheaper price than buying them.

He rented them for two thousand credits each... as for their purchase price? It ranged from twenty thousand credits to hundreds of thousands depending on the size of the pocket dimension within them.

Levi didn't think it was worth it to have so much free space at the moment when he was saving up money for his business and evolutions... especially when renting was an option.

After he filled them up to the brim with the Leviathan's materials, leaving it as a mangled corpse, sparing not even its unburnt feathers, he decided to stop and head back to the capital.

He summoned Vyra and swiftly took off in the direction of the capital... although he had added Arthur's name in the dimensional contract that served as the gate out of the site before separating from them, he still wasn't at ease leaving them on their own.

Ever since he read the letter, he had been trying his best to find answers to his questions but to no avail... this left a bad taste in his mouth, like something didn't add up about the whole situation.

Ashfall Plague, the Dawn Phoenix seeking the Glorious Evolution despite the risk involved for its people, the contamination lasting 'eons', and more... he felt like he was staring at a completed jigsaw puzzle, and yet the image didn't make much sense.

However, he believed that he was being a bit paranoid since no other evidence was presented to confirm his doubts... his rationality told him that the written history on paper was the closest to the truth when considering it aligned perfectly with the version they were told on Earth.

And yet... that uneasy feeling in his gut had never really gone away. He'd just pushed it aside to focus on the Leviathan Phoenix, but now that the fight was over and the work done... it came crawling back, stronger than before...

Chapter 278: Always Trust Your Instincts.

'I am just being overly cautious... how could the priest write anything but the truth when his empire has fallen, and he was starved to death with other refugees... what other reason could drive him to write lies, knowing that they might never be read or picked up by someone like us after eons? It just doesn't make sense,' Levi murmured inwardly as the wind kept blowing his hair.

'Boy... always trust your instinct, no matter how foolish it sounds... those with sharp instincts survive the longest, not the ones with great intelligence,' The Titan advised with a stern voice, 'Your brain can let you down, but your gut? Seldom.'

Hearing this, Levi's heart skipped a beat. His gut feeling, which had been slipping away, was reawakened. Levi was one of those people who trusted their rationality, intelligence, and facts for decision-making.

He rarely decided based on emotions since he knew that such decisions almost always came back to bite him in the ass... just like how he took down Demetris with his rifle, exposing it.

After listening to The Titan's advice, he understood that sometimes... all he had were his instincts, and if he started doubting them because there was no evidence to clear his doubts, he would definitely get caught blind-sided one day in the future.

'You're right... something is definitely off about the letter, and I am going to figure it out.'

This time, Levi didn't question his gut feeling anymore. He brought out the letter and used an aetheric barrier to shield it from the wind, allowing him to read it without damage.

As he read it again, the content was the same... nothing written in particular caught his attention to relieve the bad feeling that was gnawing at the back of his mind.

Nevertheless, Levi kept reading it over and over again, mumbling under his breath, "What am I missing? Just what? Nothing stands ou... wait."

Suddenly, Levi's finger that was tracing over the words halted the moment he read the part about the Dawn Phoenix betraying them for the sake of ascendance and fulfilling the fabled Glorious Evolution...

"He wrote she got her hands on the Sun Amulet and desired to use it as the main ingredient for its final evolution... when she failed, she went on a rampage and unleashed the Ashfall Plague... and that their beloved Pharaoh Azhukar had stood against it with the rest of their brave warriors. This is exactly the same scene that was painted on the wall hiding the refugee sanctuary..."

Levi's expression turned serious, recalling the exact details he saw on the mural. That's where he found the plot hole... the burning question that made him incapable of trusting the priest's words 100%.

"The Dawn Phoenix painted on the mural didn't show any sign of an evolution failure... The Glorious Evolution is told to be the most difficult evolution a person would dare to attempt. It has a 99% death rate, and even the surviving 1% emerge with a mutated monstrous form. If the priest and his people were the ones painting the mural to deliver the message of their history, they would have painted her in her failed form... a disgusting abomination, not in its respected form. They called her a traitor... the harbinger of their empire's destruction... where is the hate? Where is the anger?"

Levi's heartbeat kept increasing rapidly as he read the letter again, but this time... he didn't envision a distressed priest writing in despair and hope for someone to save their empire.

No, no, no...

The tone switched in his mind, and so did the vision. The Harmonic Spine started painting the dark world around him from his imagination, bringing him back to the same chamber.

As the words slipped through his lips, they resounded in his mind in a tone of someone who had bad intentions from the very beginning.

A madman writing whatever was needed... begging, offering riches, everything... for a single goal.

Levi's heart stopped for a split second. In that brief moment, his spiritual eyes met the eyes of the priest, who was hunched in the corner of the chamber. Then, his despairing expression twisted into a crazed grin, widening from ear to ear.

That's when he saw him utter word by word: "Kill the Dawn Phoenix and destroy the Sun Amulet."

Ka-thump.

Levi's heartbeat returned, but his face was as pale as a sheet of paper.

"Vyra, go faster! Faster!!"

On the other side... ten minutes before, at the depth of the Pyramid of Dawn.

Arthur, Nurah, Tyrese, Evangeline, and the rest of the exploration squads had all gathered at the throne chamber. They immediately felt the change in atmosphere as it had gotten hotter and drier, like they had stepped into a furnace.

"Woaa... this place is massive."

Arthur whistled as he gazed in awe at the ceiling stretched high above, disappearing into the shadows, while thin rays of the ring slipped through small openings near the top, lighting up parts of the room in gold.

There were rows of thick stone pillars lined up on both sides of the hall. Each one was carved with symbols and flame patterns, showing scenes from the Ashora Empire's glorious past before the collapse.

Between the pillars stood large statues of phoenixes, their wings raised halfway, eyes made of orange gems that glimmered like fire when light touched them.

"This place has truly been preserved better than anything else in the empire..."

Shia commented as her eyes traced along the walls, which were covered with carvings of phoenixes rising into the sun, their feathers painted with faded red and gold.

Yet soon, her eyes and everyone else's were drawn to the throne on the far end of the chamber. It was shaped like open phoenix wings, made of dark stone with golden edges. Although it was old and cracked, it still gave off a regal presence.

"Wait. is that..."

Suddenly, everyone noticed a small phoenix, no bigger than a hawk, resting in the middle of the throne. They were too far, which made it almost blend into the chair since they shared the same colors.

But the moment they looked closely, it was there... tucked in, slumbering in silence. Its orange feathers looked like living flames, dancing gently with each breath it took.

"The Sun Amulet! The letter was right!"

Arthur swiftly pointed his finger at a yellowish sunflower-like necklace... it was hanging around its neck, shining every once in a while.

"Keep your voice down." Jojo elbowed him, her expression solemn. "It might be small, but it's still a World Ender Classified Beast... if it retains even 1% of its strength, we might not make it out alive."

Hearing this, everyone's expressions grew tense, realizing Jojo was right. The phoenix might look harmless, but they couldn't afford to test that theory... not when it was the last living trace of the Ashora Empire, keeping its light alive through the ages. It had survived the plague, the Shadow Dimension's corruption, and even countless eons of merciless time.

"What do we do now?" Arthur wondered, keeping his voice low.

"Well, it's your Sun Amulet... go collect it."

Evangeline said calmly as she rested against the yellowish wall, the corruption somehow failing to taint the throne chamber. The rest of her team did the same, giving Arthur and the girls unbothered looks. The stunt they pulled to keep them away from the treasury was still fresh in their minds. Not because they wanted the treasures, but because they doubted their character.

"Ponytail, we still owe your team for saving us... so, we have your back whatever your decision is," Tyrese said calmly with his arms crossed.

Mira, Blake, and the rest of his teammates weren't pleased with his decision as they were still holding a grudge for being kept away from the treasury... and now that they were in the throne chamber and found no treasures in sight, it was even worse.

Yet, none of them dared to go against Tyrese's order.

"What do you think?"

Arthur had no interest in making a decision on his own. He involved the girls, but they were also doubtful about what to do next. Levi had told them to wait for him in the pyramid, but not what to do if they found the Sun Amulet.

"I say we wait for Levi... we can't wake up the phoenix without him," Shia said calmly, "What if our situation turns for the worse? Jasmine is nearby, but not him... and he already gave us permission to use the dimensional gate. If he isn't nearby, he'll be trapped here."

"I agree... we wait," Nurah nodded in support, and so did Jojo.

"Can we afford to wait?" Mira shared calmly, "We don't know when dawn will arrive, and I don't know about you, but I would rather not be here at dawn if the plague was real."

"She's got a point..." Tyrese admitted, his gaze drifting toward the ceiling. "We don't even know if we've got hours or just minutes left... this planet's sense of time isn't anything like ours."

Chapter 279: The Equilibrium Zone.

"We don't know where Levi is or what he has used to throw off the Leviathan off his back... for all we know, he might still be getting chased," Mika mentioned. "I know he is your captain, but there are sixteen of us... Do we really need him around to retrieve the Sun Amulet while it's in front of our faces? Are you that helpless without him?"

Arthur and the girls were unfazed by her words.

"I said, we wait... if you aren't comfortable waiting for the man who has literally risked his life to rescue the bunch of you, then something is wrong with you," Arthur responded coldly, his arms crossed above his chest.

Just as Mika was about to defend her stance, Tyrese extended his arm in front of her face.

"That's enough, Mika... if they want to wait, we wait." He glanced at his teammates and ordered, "Spread out and check around for any hidden chambers or such... we can't leave empty-handed."

His teammates split up and went to examine the walls, the pillars, the statues... anything but the throne, keeping their distance from its area. Soon, Evangeline's teammates followed suit.

"What kind of shitty A-grade Ancient Site is this... aren't they supposed to have dozens of corruption-based treasures, such as artifacts at least?" Mika remarked in irritation, not finding anything worth their time.

They had already explored some parts of the city before they headed to the pyramid and opened the flood of the Corrupted... however, they found nothing but the Corrupted and ruins.

They thought it would be different in the pyramid, but so far... not a single room had anything noteworthy. Sure, the treasury had treasures in it, but they never placed faith in it in the first place,

understanding that the corrupting atmosphere was enough to give birth to new treasures across eons of it interacting with the environment, lifeforms, and such.

"No," Evangeline said calmly, shaking her head. "There should've been something. The readings from SAS Headquarters showed the corruption levels hovering near perfect equilibrium... but now, it's gone cold."

"You mean the treasures were already taken by someone else exploring the site much earlier than us?" Arthur wondered.

"No one harvested anything. This isn't depletion... It's collapse," Evangeline responded as she traced her fingers on the talons of one of the statues.

"Let me explain what should've happened... When corruption and life share the same ratio... when neither overwhelms the other, a natural cycle begins. The dead release their memory residue into the soil, and the corruption seeps through it, feeding on the clarity of those memories. It has to be perfect... not too fast, not too slow. Just enough to digest them into stable mnemonic sediment. They call it the Equilibrium Zone."

"Sediment?"

Blake cleared his ears in confusion... like most Daywalkers, all he cared about was farming treasures and getting stronger. As for the inner workings of how such a complicated process worked? He never bothered to waste his time on it.

When Evangeline noticed that a couple of them were ignorant about such crucial information, her eyelids twitched. But she decided to enlighten them instead of mocking them.

"Think of it as memory-rich dust..."

Evangeline said while pulling a container that held a mesmerizing icy-blue plant from her wallet.

"Each particle carries a trace... fear, sorrow, joy, emotions, memories, and most importantly, an affinity to an element or an Aspect... Over many years, those traces intertwine and condense under the corrupting atmosphere. The corruption reshapes them into something coherent that is described as Proto-Treasures. Small dimensional echoes that mark the first signs of memory becoming matter."

Mira frowned. "So, if the balance here was perfect once, where did it go wrong?"

"The equilibrium broke," Evangeline replied simply. "Something changed the ratio. My guess is the dimensional membrane fracturing, allowing a higher quantity of corruption to rise in the atmosphere... Once the ratio slips, the digestion turns erratic. The corruption starts consuming faster than the environment can regenerate memory."

"So the cycle that should've created something beautiful and useful... just turned everything empty?" Mira inquired as she gazed at Evangeline's flower.

"Exactly." Evangeline's tone softened, "The equilibrium is fragile. It depends on a slow seepage of memory... too quick, and the corruption can't learn from what it consumes. It becomes gluttonous, erasing instead of evolving. And once that happens, there's no rebirth, no dimensional treasure... only corruption."

She put the container back inside her wallet and looked around the place, her expression almost mournful.

"This was supposed to be a cradle for relics, items to be remembered by..." she said softly, "But instead, it became a graveyard of forgotten thought... and this throne chamber will soon join the rest of the empire, consumed and becoming part of the Shadow Dimension forever without leaving a trace behind..."

"How do you know?" Mira frowned.

Evangeline pointed behind her, outside the throne chamber. "See how the rest of the pyramid was eaten by the corruption, overtaken fully? That's where the mnemonic field collapsed. The corruption ate too much, too quickly. It devoured the memory patterns entirely instead of refining them. When that happens, no Proto-Treasures can remain alive, leaving behind nothing but scars."

Mira's gaze swept the empty throne chamber. "What about this place then? I don't see any sort of corruption that is deadly to treasures' creation."

"It's because of it," Evangeline murmured, her eyes focusing on the slumbering Dawn Phoenix. "It must be the one keeping the corruption at bay, filtering the atmosphere in the throne chamber, even when the door was fully open... anything that slips by gets erased before it can turn into a problem or a treasure."

"But once we get rid of it and claim the Sun Amulet... the throne will have no protector," Nurah finished it for her.

"Well, shit..." Mira cursed under her breath in irritation.

The rest of the Daywalkers also didn't seem too fond of the idea that they would leave the ancient site empty-handed... especially when they fought to the best of their ability to earn a slot.

But there wasn't much they could do about it.

A fractured site was too unstable to support anything... especially not a treasure creation process.

"Sir Dominic and the rest of the staff must have figured out the same... but their goal was always the Sun Amulet, not the treasures," Evangeline sighed. "Though it doesn't really matter... even if they told us, we would have still joined for the sake of them being wrong. After all, no one truly knows anything going on in an Ancient Distorted Site unless they set foot in it."

Hearing this, everyone nodded in agreement... even if Dominic told them that the site was empty, they would have still committed. No one was stupid enough to pass on exploring an A-Grade Ancient Site.

After all, there was still the existence of a treasury, and at the moment, all of them knew that Jasmine was heading towards it.

This didn't sit right with many of them.

"Alright, I don't want to be the asshole, but someone has to." Mira's tone changed to a cold one. "We appreciate rescuing us, we really do... but if it means we are still going outside empty-handed, then what's the point? We could have saved ourselves by leaving the site through dimensional gates... instead, here we are... helping you claim the Sun Amulet from a freaking World Ender Class Beast while your silent princess is raiding the treasury, and refusing to let us know of its location... You can't even spare us ten percent of the treasury? How greedy is that?"

This time, even Evangeline's teammates seemed to side with her... their expressions had turned cold. They had believed Levi's team saved them out of goodwill and integrity, but now it looked as though the rescue had only been a means to hire them as bodyguards while Levi's group raided the pyramid under their watch.

If there was any presence of corruption-based treasures, they would have been somewhat satisfied with how things turned out.

But now? Not so much... especially when the treasury and the Sun Amulet were the only treasures in sight, and Levi's team wanted to claim all of it.

It was too greedy in their eyes.

"Are you forgetting that the only reason you are still here is because of us?" Shia uttered coldly as she gazed at Mira. "If we knew you would be ungrateful, we should have left you on your own... then, let's see how far your mouth would have gotten you."

Just as Mira was about to respond, Jojo added... her tone wasn't the nicest.

"I pushed to rescue you because it was the right thing to do... nothing more, nothing less. If you thought we needed your help, then you grossly overestimate your importance to us."

"Again, you can always leave... we don't need you, we never did."

Arthur reminded them that they wanted to explore the pyramid on their own in the first place... it was they who refused to leave their side. Now, Mira was trying to twist it in their favor? Not happening.

"I don't know why you guys are surprised." Nurah yawned lazily. "I expected such a reaction... when it comes to riches, nothing truly matters, which is why I didn't want them around us in the first place."

"Don't include me with them," Evangeline replied sternly as she gazed at her teammates, forcing them to lower their heads in shame. "Regardless of whether I leave empty-handed or not, the fact still stands... You saved us. That's all to it."

"Well, if you, Miss Moral, are fine with it, we aren't..." Mira narrowed her eyes coldly. "Our region has invested too much in us to get in this site, and our government expects some returns. Otherwise, their investment in our progress will be slashed."

"How is that our problem, exactly?" Nurah tilted her head in confusion.

"It became yours the moment you decided you wanted to own every treasure in sight."

Out of nowhere, a foreign low-pitched voice resounded with a frigid tone from behind them... when Arthur and the girls swiftly turned their heads, they were stunned to see Nick standing near the throne, his arm extended in the direction of the slumbering little Phoenix's neck.

He was wearing a fully black leather outfit with a hooded cape and a pair of sunglasses that hid his face almost entirely... He was part of Tyrese's team and one of the weirdest ones, rarely interacting with anyone.

One could easily forget his existence from how much he kept to himself... but that wasn't merely because of his withdrawn nature... it was also a reflection of his craft. He hailed from one of North America's most infamous assassination lineages, the Nightcloud Lineage, akin to Nurah's Blackthorn Lineage.

Just like now... while everyone was arguing, he had slipped toward the throne unnoticed, moving so silently it was as if the air itself concealed him.

"Nick... what are you doing?" Tyrese's expression hardened.

"What we have to... but you don't have the guts to give such an order," Nick said indifferently. "You're the captain, and yet... you're led by your emotions. If you're fine with returning empty-handed to our families and region, I am not."

Chapter 280: An Abomination.

"Nick, don't be foolish... You are too close to the Phoenix," Tyrese warned sternly. "You might wake it up."

"That's what I am planning to do if these Heliodorians refuse to sign a contract ensuring that we get at least 20% of the treasury... 20% for the Sun Amulet. Sounds more than fair to me."

Upon hearing his threat, Arthur and the girls' expressions turned frigid instantly.

"Nicky... you don't want to do this."

Nurah summoned her shadowy daggers with a faint smile, but not an ounce of emotion was in it... The moment Mira, Blake, and the rest of Tyrese's team saw this, they swiftly summoned their weapons too... their expressions turned grim.

"I guess that's a no..." Nick said, unfazed by weapons being drawn.

"Nick! Don't you dare..." Tyrese shouted furiously, not fond of his teammate going against his authority like this.

Alas, the warning came too late... Nick lifted the amulet from the Phoenix's neck as gently as possible to avoid waking it up.

Then, he extended it in the direction of Arthur's team. But just as he was about to ask them about the location of the treasury, using the Sun Amulet as a bargaining chip, he heard a faint shudder coming from within the Sun Amulet.

He knitted his brows in confusion as he leaned his head closer to the Sun Amulet to confirm if he heard right.

That's when he heard it... No, when everyone heard it.

Crack.

The Sun Amulet cracked from the middle of the flower, and then a surge of golden flames escaped from the crack!

The moment the heat reached the slumbering Phoenix, her orange feathers moved slightly as she opened her eyes... she looked directly at the Sun Amulet in Nick's hand, and once she saw the crack, her eyes filled with sadness, not anger.

Kraa...

A soft, mournful chirp escaped its beak. The sound wasn't loud, but it cut through everyone's chest, leaving them with a bad, bad feeling.

"W-what's happening?" Nick whispered, backing away from the throne.

He thought that the Phoenix was the danger.

He thought that the Phoenix was going to assault him.

Sigh, how wrong he was...

The Sun Amulet caught fire instantly... bright orange flames that burned his gloved hand and started crawling up Nick's arm like he was drowned in gasoline.

"AAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

His scream pierced through the chamber as the fire spread over him. His first instinct was to throw the Sun Amulet away, but alas... no matter how hard he tried to drop it, his hand wouldn't let go!

"NIIICK!!"

Tyrese and his teammates shouted with grim expressions, but only Tyrese dared to rush in Nick's direction to save him.

However, before he could clear half the distance, the Dawn Phoenix let out another faint, pained cry, and then it collapsed on the chair...

The moment this happened, the orange flames grew stronger and reached further, wrapping around both the Phoenix and Nick until they were covered in a blinding light.

Everyone shielded their eyes and retreated multiple steps back, feeling the insane heat assault their skin.

When the light faded, both were gone.

Only ash remained... and the Sun Amulet dropped on the ground, now cracked and shaking with unstable energy.

All Arthur, Nurah, Evangeline, and the rest of the Daywalkers could do was watch in stunned silence as the Sun Amulet split open from the middle.

They had no idea what was happening, and no one was there to clear their confusion, leaving them to watch with bated breath as the orange flames began to take the form of a tall, humanoid bird.

But as the details started to emerge, many Daywalkers felt their skin crawl in pure dread at the abomination before them.

What stepped out of the broken Sun Amulet didn't look like a regal Phoenix at all. It looked like something that had been burned and twisted for a very long time.

His body was a mix of melted metal and scorched, cracked flesh... thin lines of red light ran through his skin like cracks in cooling lava, and every time he moved, smoke came out from them.

His wings were ruined... One was broken and covered in pointy, dark spines instead of feathers... the other was only a skeleton, with pieces of metal and burned bones still stuck together.

His hair was gone too... in its place, a burnt crown had melted into his skull, looking like the remains of the royal crown he once wore, now fused into his head.

Arthur and the girls felt their hearts skip a beat after the abomination's face was reconstructed from the flames... their reaction was understandable.

Half of his face still showed what he might have looked like before... proud, strong, and royal. However, the other half looked destroyed, burned so badly that part of his jawbone showed through the melted skin. When he moved his beak briefly, sparks came out of his mouth, like his words were made of fire.

Yet, his eyes were the worst part... one glowed gold, faint and weak. The other was nothing but an empty hole, gazing into the darkness within him.

Soon, the reconstruction was completed after a beating heart of fire was born from the middle of a gaping hole in his chest.

When Nurah and the others saw the pieces of his old, melted armor still stuck to his body, their pupils thinned in dread after recognizing the faded royal symbols on it... It was the same as they saw in the temple's mural!

"Pharaoh Azhukar..." Jojo mumbled under her breath what was on everyone's minds.

Hearing his name called, the abomination lifted his head and glanced in their direction...then, he tilted his head slightly, seemingly incapable of understanding what was going on around him.

But as he looked at the walls, the pillars, the statues, and finally turned his head to the throne and the pile of ash on it, memories came gushing back, akin to an unstoppable flood.

He massaged his temple, his expression somewhat disturbed. But then, the pain went away, and what remained was the truth.

"Ahh... so the seal has finally broken," he uttered in ancient Ilthorian.

Almost everyone understood what he said... they swiftly stepped back again while raising their weapons on instinct... none of them spoke, their raging heartbeats were the only thing resounding in the throne chamber.

It was for a good reason... besides his harrowing appearance, none of them were able to pick up on his spiritual aura.

This was always a bad sign rather than a good one, as it meant one thing... their spiritual vision was too low to even pick up on it!!

In simpler terms... the entity before them was no lesser than a Tier 8 nightcrawler or Radiant Daywalker.

'Dear god... what have we done?'

As fear was slowly chipping away at their minds, Pharaoh Azhukar's eye moved across them one by one, studying their faces like they were strangers from another world... in this case, it was literal, as he couldn't recognize their race at all.

"Tell me..." he said in a deep regal voice that echoed through the chamber, "Were you the ones who freed me from that cursed prison?"

No one answered... they kept staring at each other, many thoughts roaming through their minds.

But then, Nurah stepped forward after a few seconds, her expression calm... then, she took a knee and spoke with her head lowered, "Your Majesty... Pharaoh Azhukar, ruler of the Ashora Empire, Lord of the Radiant Flame... we have gone through great lengths to release you after we heard of your great achievement and heroic attempt to save your empire and people from the wrath of the traitorous Dawn Phoenix."

"..."

"..."

"..."

Arthur, Tyrese, Evangeline, and the rest of the Daywalkers went silent for a moment after hearing the nonsense Nurah had just spewed... but they figured out instantly what kind of angle she was relying on to save themselves from this damning situation. They swiftly got rid of their weapons and knelt on their knees one by one, lowering their heads as well.

Seeing this, Pharaoh Azhukar cracked a faint, pleased smile and lifted one arm slowly, as if addressing his loyal subjects.

"You, people of foreign skin," Azhukar declared, his voice deep and commanding. "You have rendered me a great service. As Emperor of the Ashora Empire, I shall see that each of you is rewarded in full measure."

Hearing this, a flicker of hope was restored in the hearts of the Daywalkers, feeling like Nurah's strategy might work if they committed to it.

At the moment, they didn't care about the Sun Amulet, the treasures, or the promised rewards... nothing. They just wanted to escape back to Earth in one piece, recognizing that the letter's content was a crafted lie for the sake of freeing the Pharaoh from his imprisonment!

When they combined it with the Pharaoh's current hideous appearance, and the hint of grief and sorrow from the Dawn Phoenix, the truth had cleared their cloudy eyes at last.

They still didn't know what happened exactly in the past, but one thing they were sure about... the Pharaoh was no hero, and he had the strength to turn them into a pile of ash with a single order.

However, before the flicker of hope could grow, it was extinguished the moment Pharaoh Azhukar's gaze went distant... his senses reaching far beyond the room, through the halls, the city, the ruins.

That's when he saw it... the state of his empire, his people, everything. His eye widened to the limit in horror and grief.

"No..." he whispered. "My empire... my people..."

Whoosh!

A wave of rage erupted from him, his hidden spiritual aura surging wildly as orange flames burst forth, taking the shape of a massive, roaring phoenix.

Thud! Thud!

Everyone was slammed to the ground, their faces pressed into the yellow stone floor... the spiritual pressure made it impossible to move a single finger!

"Who did this!?"

His charged voice shook the whole pyramid. Evangeline gritted her teeth and forced herself to speak.

"The Shadow Dimension..." She said weakly. "The corruption consumed it. Your empire... your people... they were devoured and corrupted by it."

Hearing this, Azhukar went silent for a few moments... then he relaxed his spiritual pressure on them and asked, his voice devoid of emotion.

"What's the date?"

"Year 534 of the 87th Millennium, Chained Era."