

## Evolution 58

Chapter 58: The Willow Grove.

A short while later...

Levi had arrived at the Solar Aegis Sanctuary, located at the very heart of the Heliodor Holy Region. Unlike the jungle of concrete and glass around it, the Sanctuary stood inside a colossal ancient tree.

Its enormous trunk bore the scars of time as it rose defiantly amidst the concrete labyrinth.

Though its size rivaled that of its neighboring skyscrapers, its massive brown branches reached outward like a forgotten divinity... twisting gently around steel and glass.

It was as if the tree were a sentinel, growing with perfect awareness... never disturbing the structures around it.

As for its leaves... they were nothing short of a masterpiece.

Known as Celestial Crescents, they were unlike ordinary foliage. Each leaf resembled a crescent moon with a single elegant spiral unfurling from the stem.

Under the sunlight, their surface shimmered with hues of gold, silver, and emerald... as if brushed by stardust.

"The Willow Grove... how I wish I could see you again."

Levi murmured with a wistful smile, using the noise of the crowd to shape the tree in his mind.

Despite his best efforts, Willow Grove's image returned hazy and chaotic. Sound waves could never capture its true, ancient beauty.

He remembered sitting beneath the Savior's tree every Saturday, brought there by his parents... Arthur was always at his side, both of them laughing and running with other kids, untouched by the weight of the world.

To Levi, the tree was sacred. It wasn't just a landmark... it was the reason the region still stood strong after more than a century.

If the Heliodor region were a living body, the Willow Grove was its heart.

And if that heart were to die... the heavenly light pillar protecting the city would flare in wrath and reduce everyone beneath it to ash in seconds. That's why the government enforced the 30% crystallized seed offering...The Savior's Tax.

Most Daywalkers didn't complain... because they knew the Grove's survival depended on it.

As a dimensional entity from the upper realms, the Willow Grove couldn't feed on water or soil... at least, that's what every child was taught. Respect for the Grove was etched into them from the moment they could speak.

Now, a massive crowd had gathered at the base of the tree... or more specifically, at the threshold of the Solar Aegis Sanctuary.

The Sanctuary was the only entity allowed to occupy space inside the Willow Grove... not even the government dared to challenge it.

Around the world, the Solar Aegis Sanctuaries were revered. They were the only link to the Radian entities. If they pulled back their divine pillars, the world would be left at the mercy of nightcrawlers.

If the government served the people... the Sanctuaries were the royalty watching over them.

Luckily, Heliodor's Sanctuary and the local government got along well enough. The Sanctuary allowed the state to host its biggest events here... in exchange for a hefty payment in crystallized seeds.

Not cheap, but worth every drop.

Levi moved past the throngs and ascended the wide white-marble stairs leading to the enormous hollow entrance at the base of the Grove.

When he reached the guarded section where civilian sheriffs kept order, he was stopped at once.

"Show approved application or back off," the sheriff warned. He wore a dark blue uniform with black boots and a belt... armed with the same wooden firearm used by Anti-Sleepwalker officers.

Levi calmly forwarded his approved application and motioned toward the sheriff's inbox.

The sheriff checked his holographic display, brows raising slightly. Levi's application was valid... and he was sponsored.

"Please... enter from here."

With a respectful nod, the sheriff pulled aside the railing and let him through.

Levi climbed the circular staircase under the watchful gaze of the crowd.

—Good luck, boy! You got this!

—Make us proud and come back with a contract!

—We're rooting for you!

Levi smiled faintly at the voices. For the first time, he felt what it was like to be truly supported.

Not because he was special... but because in this region, Daywalkers were revered. They hunted nightcrawlers and harvested the seeds that kept everyone alive. Without them, the Willow Grove would fall... and the people along with it.

It had already happened elsewhere. Entire holy regions turned to dust.

At the final step, Levi paused.

Then, he braced his right leg and stomped down on the mirror-smooth marble.

A sonic wave erupted... washing into the Grove and feeding him a full map of its interior.

What returned nearly stole his breath; not out of fear... but excitement.

Over two hundred humanoid auras filled the chamber... grayed out and scattered in every direction. All of them had turned toward him... the newcomer, standing alone in the massive open threshold.

After a moment, they turned back to whatever they were doing, unaware of Levi's true condition.

"Here we go."

Levi drew in a steady breath and stepped into the hall... his serene smile intact.

But it didn't last.

"BIG BRO! HAHA, YOU MADE IT!"

Arthur's voice thundered through the solemn space.

Levi's eyelid twitched as everyone turned toward him again... and to the approaching hurricane that was his brother.

While Levi couldn't see him directly, his senses told him enough. Arthur's muscles had shrunk slightly... not from neglect, but refinement.

He had worked himself to the brink... compacting his body into something leaner, deadlier... more efficient.

Just as Arthur lunged forward for a hug, Levi's instincts flared.

Without thinking, he slipped sideways and lightly tapped Arthur's head with the end of his staff.

It looked like nothing... but a few candidates caught it. Levi did it without even facing him.

"Do you have to be so loud?" Levi muttered. "You're in a sacred place... try not to get us kicked out."

"Ah... my bad. I just missed you, man." Arthur rubbed his head, grinning as he offered a fist bump.

Levi tapped it.

"I missed you too. The place has been way too quiet without you."

"Haha, I know I leave a good presence everywhere I go."

"Yes, yes..."

If Levi had eyes, he would've rolled them so hard they'd rattle.

Arthur had probably flipped the entire Blood Hunters Agency upside down. Loud, shameless, and utterly himself.

And now, in a room full of silent, serious candidates... he still didn't care.

"Come, come... let me introduce you to some of my new friends." Arthur tugged him toward a small group huddled beneath a twisted white staircase spiraling upward.

The staircase led to the uppermost floors within Willow Grove, where a significant portion of the tree's hollow interior had been converted into housing quarters for the Sanctuary.

Hovering at the center of the spiral staircase's shaft was a wooden platform... adorned with massive Ilthorien inscriptions carved across its surface. It hovered gently, like a natural elevator pulsing with arcane energy.

Just like the staircase and the floating lift, the rest of the Sanctuary's interior was either sculpted directly from the tree's trunk or crafted with meticulous artistry meant to harmonize with the living wood. The smooth marble flooring blended seamlessly with the organic surroundings.

Altogether, the atmosphere was cozy, serene, and steeped in a quiet reverence... befitting of the ancient tree's name: Willow Grove.

When they arrived at a small gathering nestled near the base of the spiraling staircase, Arthur clapped his hands together and began his introductions.

After naming each person with the same enthusiasm as a show host, he grinned proudly and gestured toward Levi.

"This is my big brother, Levi... the one I've been telling you all about."

The trio before them consisted of two girls and one boy, each contract seeker with their own energy and presence.

"Hello," Levi greeted politely, "thank you for looking after my little brother."

"You're welcome... he's quite a handful," Melissa replied with a small laugh.

She had the poise of someone who didn't mind being stared at. Tall and slender, Melissa had violet hair twisted into a bun and dramatic eyes lined with dark eyeliner. Her midnight lipstick matched her gothic ensemble: a black leather jacket, tight-sliced jeans, and tall boots with silver skulls embedded on the sides. Her long black nails had tiny skulls painted on them as well.

Melissa wasn't just a pretty face... she was the first candidate sponsored under the Blood Hunters Agency. That alone placed her potential near the top, as the Morningstar family wasn't known for wasting investments.

"With how much Arthur kept hyping up his big brother, I figured you'd be twice his size," joked the boy, Rayan, extending a friendly handshake. "Glad you're not. One of him is more than enough."

"You're right, one of me is enough," Arthur smirked, flexing his muscles like a proud beast, drawing uneasy glances from nearby candidates.

Just because they had made it here didn't mean success was guaranteed. Some were on their second and final attempt... others had shown up just for the experience. Nightcrawlers were highly selective about their partners. They weren't looking for sympathy... they were looking for survivors.

That's why the contract ritual assembly stretched across multiple days. Time was needed to test each candidate thoroughly... inside and out.

"You're Shia's little cousin, right?" Levi asked as he shook Rayan's hand.

Arthur had kept Levi updated even while locked in the agency. He'd already told him about befriending a Morningstar cousin... a thrill-seeking relative named Rayan.

Though he didn't carry a recommendation letter, he didn't need one. He was family. The letters were meant for the unconnected: the orphans, the exiles... not heirs.

"Yep. I've heard all about your trip to the Harrowing Forest," Rayan nodded, clearly impressed. "Exploring the wastelands without being Daywalkers? Man... your balls must be made of titanium."

"You know we almost died, right?"

"Yep... aaaaaand that must've made you feel so alive. I'm so, so jealous."

Rayan clutched his chest dramatically as if restraining an outburst of emotion.

Levi raised a brow, unimpressed. 'Why do weirdos always surround me...'

Rayan looked like a spindly street rat, long-legged, underfed, but his energy was pure fire. A red-haired Morningstar through and through, with a faded undercut, curly top, and sharp golden-amber eyes that didn't seem to blink often. His skin was light brown and dusted with a few freckles across the nose.

His outfit screamed chaos. Neon-trimmed tech pants, a sleeveless combat vest glowing with red circuitry, fingerless gloves, high-speed boots with shock absorbers... and to top it off, a cropped black hoodie torn at the edges. The look wasn't designed, it was survived in.

He radiated the kind of adrenaline that made people flinch without knowing why.

"Rayan, that's enough. You're scaring our new friend."

A soft, tranquil voice cut in. Levi turned instinctively, picking up a humanoid figure in his echolocation... bald, robed, serene.

"Namaste... I am Houda Omari. But you can call me Monk JoJo."

She clasped her palms together and offered a graceful bow. Her scalp gleamed under the sun. It was so perfectly smooth and shiny that it reflected a beam of light across the chamber, temporarily blinding someone on the other side of the hall.

"It's you..." Levi muttered under his breath, recalling the girl Arthur had once told him about... the one he scammed at the gym.

Well... not technically scammed. She had offered to pay him a thousand lumens for a session.

"You remember her, big bro?" Arthur grinned, oblivious to social grace. "The one from the gym with the weird exercises. I spotted her earlier and added her to the squad."

Levi prepared to scold him for being blunt... but JoJo beat him to it.

Her smile vanished. "Says the guerrilla who broke five machines in under three months. If the manager weren't terrified of you, you'd have been banned long ago."

"At least I'm not the gym's laughingstock," Arthur shot back while pulling weird moves, " 'Namaste, hya! Namaste, hya!' "

JoJo noticed everyone staring... some chuckling. But instead of retreating, she doubled down, mocking Arthur with exaggerated muscle poses and dumb flexing faces.

"Ah, IOoK aT mY tRiCePs, hAhA... mY mUsKLeS gRoW bIgGeR, hAhA..."

With her bald head gleaming and her monk robes fluttering, she looked like a deranged bodybuilder in cosplay.

It should have been enough to shut Arthur up... but no. He was just as childish.

"Namaste, ho! Namaste punch!"

"My bAck... sO wIdE yOu cAn eAt oN iT!"

Just like that... the serious, composed image Levi had projected at the entrance shattered completely. The group had earned its label.

They were that crowd.

Levi's face went blank. "It's my fault for leaving him alone... my fault."

Beside him, Melissa and Rayan attempted damage control, trying to separate the two clowns before things escalated further.

It had only taken a few minutes for them to be branded the weirdos of the gathering.

But as Levi stood there... listening to their nonsense... he found himself chuckling quietly, recalling that he was a blind boy desiring to become a Daywalker.

'I'm just as weird as them. Maybe even worse. Huh... birds of the same feather do flock together. Who would've guessed?'