

The Glorious Evolution

#Chapter 11: The Harrowing Forest. - Read The Glorious Evolution Chapter 11: The Harrowing Forest.

Chapter 11 - The Harrowing Forest.

"Is this why it's called the Harrowing Forest?" Arthur inquired, still not scared.

"It used to be called Forest Bni Abid before the fall of civilization." Levi educated his little brother, "After the Shadow Castle took over, the forest was altered over time by the seeping corruption of the Shadow Dimension."

"The first brave pioneers renamed it to The Harrowing Forest after hearing the noise and believing that the wind wasn't producing it, but it was the cries of captured souls within the Shadow Dimension."

"Well, looks like the second part was a load of crap." Arthur chuckled, listening to the nonstop windy cries.

He knew that with the destruction of the Shadow Castle, the permanent link to the Shadow Dimension was gone for good.

Sure, some Stygian Gates would be opened here and there, but they would be used only by mindless Tier 1 or Tier 2 Nightcrawlers.

The intelligent Tier 3 Nightcrawlers and above were either already eliminated with the Shadow Castle or escaped to another region.

In other words, the week after clearing those shadow castles and higher-ranked nightcrawlers' nests was always the safest for Daywalkers to explore.

Still, it was never a bad idea to be safe.

"Activate your nightwear strips," Shia ordered after noticing the weakening of moonlight as they went deeper into the forest.

The forest's trees were mostly cork oaks, known for their thick and rugged bark. However, when there were too many of them, their size could cover the sky, allowing darkness to reign.

Shia, Jamal, and Sergio pulled out thin white stripes and placed them on their arms, thighs, back, and chest.

Then, she offered a few strips to Levi and Arthur.

"You know how to use them?" She asked.

"How couldn't we?" Levi smiled bitterly as he moved his fingers across the thin smooth white stripes.

"What does that supposed to mean?" Shia frowned.

"It's nothing."

Levi kept quiet as he covered his body with the stripes, using his brother's help in areas he couldn't reach.

Seeing that both of them were ready, Shia dropped the subject, knowing that it wasn't time for a useless chitchat.

"Astra, activate Nightwear stripes."

In a matter of seconds, all the used nightwear stripes were turned on under Shia's order, illuminating at least ten meters around the party.

The best part? The light was gentle on the eyes as each stripe contained thousands of tiny, energy-efficient LEDs capable of emitting controlled light outwards.

However, the light was still artificial, which meant it was harmless to the nightcrawlers and was used specifically for constant cheap illumination.

With decent light on their side, the party carried on their exploration, making sure to check every tree, boulder, and hole.

"Why are we searching here? Isn't it much more efficient to reach the forest's depths first?" Arthur wondered.

"Most of The Blood Crystal Flowers and other natural treasures must have already been collected by Sunstrike Agency's main squad at the depths." Shia answered, "But, none of them will bother wasting their precious time searching the entire forest for the rest."

"That's why Mantis has bought most Daywalkers over, wanting to clear out the entire forest." Jamal added while flipping a boulder over, "In simpler terms, we might get lucky in the outer circle."

"I see." Arthur nodded in understanding while getting his hands dirty too.

Levi was the only one not doing much work. He was left to sit on a fallen trunk, holding onto his white cane on his lap. Not even Sergio dared to go as low as asking a blind kid to help them search for the flowers.

After spending a few minutes clearing an area, the party packed up and moved to another area. Then, they repeated the process.

In this manner, they were going deeper into the forest while making sure to explore as much surface area as possible.

"How is it this quiet?" Levi knitted his eyebrows as he kept looking around him.

He expected to spot a couple of Tier 1 nightcrawlers roaming the forest, but nothing appeared in his spiritual sight. Only darkness and his party's nightcrawlers, who were chilling with him.

"It is a bit strange," Blee'der interjected, "Maybe the Sunstrike Agency has completely wiped out the nest? Not sparing even the low-tiered nightcrawlers?"

"Maybe...The fatty has told me that the Sunstrike Agency has chosen to play a Death Game to reclaim the territory." O'thnir shared calmly, "We all know this approach almost always results in the elimination of 99% of the nest per the Nocturnal Contract terms."

"Oh? I didn't know they chose a Death Game." Levi raised an eyebrow in surprise, "No wonder the forest seems barely touched by their conquest."

The news shared publicly wasn't always complete since journalists and reporters couldn't go out and bring the actual news live.

This meant the news was heavily dependent on what the agencies or the government wanted to share.

Of course, this affected the public mostly as those agencies were forced by law to give a thorough report of their expeditions to the authorities.

This resulted in pieces of the news being shared amongst the upper echelons and Daywalkers, allowing even Shia's party to hear rumors.

"Looks like we spoke too soon." Levi suddenly said while gazing at ten approaching green auras from every direction.

The auras resembled double-headed green hogs with two long horns in the center of their back.

"I see nothing?" Blee'der frowned, "Are you imagining stuff?"

"They are approaching from all sides in the real world." Levi clarified.

"Wait, you can see nightcrawlers in the real world?" Blee'der's eyes widened in shock.

"Yes, they appear as spiritual auras." Levi replied calmly, "But, is this really the time to be talking about this? They are getting closer."

Blee'der, O'rro, and O'thnir glanced at each other in confusion for a second before they nodded at each other and swiftly returned to their partners.

"We might have company."

As Shia and the others heard their contracted nightcrawlers' warning, they immediately summoned them as signature weapons and entered a small formation around Levi and Arthur.

"What's going on?" Arthur's expression turned solemn.

Shia shushed him with a finger while glancing at Jamal, who was holding onto a Psionic Bow, which was covered in hardened green scales.

The bow had no arrows or a string. Yet, Jamal closed his eyes and aimed at the top. As his concentration reached its zenith, a spiritual misty string manifested on the bow, allowing Jamal to hold onto it and pull it to the limit.

Arthur watched in utter fascination as an amber-colored arrow seemed to flicker between reality and illusion emerged in the center of the bow.

Before he could react, Jamal released the arrow into the sky.

With his eyes closed and two fingers placed on his right temple, Jamal started controlling the arrow freely, seeing exactly what the arrow was seeing!

It was like he had an ancient GoPro strapped on the arrow, allowing him to turn it into a controllable drone.

The arrow kept piercing through trees and boulders without its speed weakening at all as it was created out of Jamal's spiritual energy.

After making a swift scan around them, he spotted ten peculiar horns protruding from the dirt while slowly edging closer.

"It's Dirt Eater Hogs. I have spotted ten, but there might be more. The closest one is twenty meters away from us."

Jamal informed them after canceling his scanning ability. Then, he raised an eyebrow in astonishment, knowing that it should have been impossible for their contracted nightcrawlers to spot them from this distance.

Especially, when the Dirt Eater Hogs were known to move two meters underground, exposing only their horns, which were hollow and used for breathing.

But, he knew that it wasn't time for such questions.

"Good job." Shia nodded while entering a battle stance, "Leave them to me, keep the brothers safe."

Chapter 12 - Upgraded Spiritual Vision.

Hearing that they had company, Arthur immediately stood in front of Levi while holding onto a giant thick log. It must weigh at least fifty kilograms, yet, Arthur was holding it akin to a great sword.

Levi couldn't see what was going on, but he had the assistance of his Ai as she was narrating everything. He used his rich imagination to fill in the rest of the details.

"I can smell them, I can smell their blood, they are close."

Meanwhile, Shia followed the foreign smell of their blood until she stood at exactly the center of their ambush, redirecting their attention to her solely.

It was in a small space filled with dead leaves and tiny rocks, cornered by four oak trees. Shia closed her eyes and controlled her breath while holding onto the pole of her crimson crescent-bladed glaive.

After a few moments of harrowing windy cries, the dead leaves started jumping all over the place as tremors took over the space!

Then, from the depths of darkness, ten giant double-headed hogs emerged with pure viciousness in their eyes as they charged toward Shia!

Oink! Oink! Oink!!!

Saliva was pouring out of their mouths, tainting their long sharp fangs...Their eyes were pitch-black, reflecting the shimmering Shia akin to a delicious snack!

They knocked down trees in their path, creating a loud disturbance in the entire forest. In front of humans, the light, plants absorbed meant absolutely nothing to nightcrawlers even if they were low-tiered and nonintelligent!

Seeing this overwhelming sight, Arthur couldn't help but gulp a mouthful in dread. Just as he was about to wonder if it was fine to leave Shia alone, she made her move.

"Mantra Blood Arts: Blood Ring of Damnation."

She murmured calmly as she started swinging the glaive rapidly once the hogs stepped inside the circle of light produced by her nightwear stripes!

Slice! Slice! Slice!...

The crescent blade flew out of the pole, spinning extremely fast as it sliced the charging hogs, the flying leaves, rocks, and whatever was inside the circle of illumination!

Just like a spot dancer, Shia moved only her arm as she kept swinging the detached pole, taking a mere step back and forth.

"How is she controlling the crescent blade..."

Arthur exclaimed in astonishment as he watched the terrifying spinning crescent blade cut through the hogs with minimum resistance!

"There is a string of sticky blood connecting the pole with the crescent blade." Sergio shared with a faint smirk.

Arthur squinted at Shia's pole, wanting to see the string of blood but to no avail.

The flying blood of the hogs was congealing in midair and following the trajectory of the crimson crescent, making it extremely difficult to see anything else.

In less than a few seconds, the dying squeals of the hogs were no longer heard. Only the whooshing air of Shia's crescent blade spinning around the ten-meter radius, creating a perfect ring of blood with the sliced-up corpses of the hogs...

"Bon appetite."

Blee'der's terrifying mouth manifested on the crescent blade, and it started sucking off the long serpentine blood, sparing not a single drop.

After he was done, he burped loudly and Shia summoned him back.

Then, she returned to the squad and said, "Collect their crystallized seeds quickly, the noise must have attracted other nightcrawlers."

"Good work."

"Brutal as always."

Jamal and Sergio patted her on the shoulder and swiftly went to the crime scene.

"You should go with them to learn how to extract crystallized seeds." Shia addressed Arthur.

Arthur glanced at his brother for a moment and then looked at Shia. After recalling what she had just done to those hogs, he knew he was leaving his brother in safe hands.

"Be right back."

He threw the massive log away and then worked on the corpses with Sergio and Jamal, who started teaching him the most efficient ways to extract crystallized seeds.

Once an owner of a Shadowlife seed dies, his seed get crystallized into a somewhat blue gem. Those crystallized seeds were everything to Daywalkers since they were traded for Solar Aegis coins, which was the main currency for Daywalkers' related markets.

Shia reached out inside her pocket and pulled out two covered lollipops. She placed one in Levi's palm, and he shook his head politely, "No, thank you, I am on a sugar-free diet."

"Sugar-free? How boring is that." Shia shrugged her shoulders, "Suit yourself."

"Cool attack you have there." Levi inquired in intrigue, "Is it an innate ability or a learned technique?"

"It's learned." Shia shared with a lollipop in her mouth.

"You learned such a powerful ability while being a junior Daywalker?" Levi was surprised.

Although Levi's source of information was his Ai and he didn't really see the full extent of Shia's ability, he knew it was extremely powerful.

After all, a Junior Daywalker shouldn't be able to take down ten Tier 1 nightcrawlers in a few seconds without using an innate ability.

He understood that becoming a Daywalker was quite easy, but what truly separated a genius from a mediocre was his resistance/attunement to light and his teachability.

Most rookie and junior daywalkers relied on their innate abilities, which were easily unlocked after passing each stage.

On the other hands, techniques required time, dedication, and talent.

"It's not special, I have been at a junior level for more than half a year now." Shia curled her lips in annoyance, "I didn't know it would be this bothersome to find a Blood Crystal Flower."

"Don't mind me asking, but shouldn't it be easy for you to obtain it?" Levi inquired, "I mean, your family's wealth and reputation should have been more than enough to secure a flower even if it was located in other Holy Regions."

"No thank you, I would rather shoot myself in the head before I ask help from that controlling narcissist," Shia uttered coldly as she made a gun gesture next to her temple.

Levi knew that she was referring to her father as he had heard quite many crazy stories that painted him in a bad light.

If this was his perception of his character from mere stories, he didn't dare imagine what Shia was dealing with daily.

"Forget that old geezer and tell me more about your peculiar spiritual vision." Shia asked curiously, "Blee'der has already told me that you were the one spotting the hogs' ambush."

"Oh, it's nothing special really." Levi smiled, "I have gained the ability to see nightcrawlers and Daywalkers in the real world in their spiritual aura form."

"What do you mean it's nothing special?!" Shia's eyes widened in shock, "You have a freaking superpower without even being a Daywalker!"

Shia's reaction was understandable. She knew that nightcrawlers could exist either in the real world or in the shadow dimension.

Those two were considered physical planes while the bridge of darkness was the spiritual link to both dimensions.

However, they could access the bridge of darkness only from the shadow dimension, whether they were contracted or not!

That's why, Bleed'er and the others were incapable of seeing the Dirt Eater Hogs in the real world through the bridge just like they could not see humans unless they were connected to the bridge of darkness.

In simpler terms, their vision was limited to only nightcrawlers existing in the shadow dimension or the bridge of darkness, unlike Levi!

"I wouldn't go as far as to call it a superpower." Levi smiled faintly as he watched Jamal and Sergio's humanoid spiritual auras, "But, it does bring some humane life into my dim world..."

"You are crazy...How can you downplay such a busted cheat?" Shia spoke excitedly, already seeing the crazy possibilities, "You are like a radar to nightcrawlers! You can see their physical forms if they were in the shadow dimension and their spiritual forms if they were in the real world! None of them can escape your sight."

"Then what?" Levi chuckled in self-derision, "Will this help me become a Daywalker? I have already tried my best to sell it to nightcrawlers, but all of them still rejected me."

"This..."

Shia's excitement died down. She realized that while Levi's spiritual vision was amazing, it still wouldn't change the fact that he could not grow as a Daywalker consistently as the others without eyes.

Sure, he could utilize Growth Totems, but they were too expensive to maintain consistent growth compared to simply absorbing the sunlight directly.

"I mean, while your future as a Daywalker seems grim, I do believe that you can become a great scout using your ability." Shia tried to uplift him, "I, for one, will be more than delighted to have you in my squad. Without your help, the hogs would have made me sweat a bit."

"Thank you for the offer, but I have no interest in giving up on my dream," Levi said calmly.

"Suit yourself, but don't forget," Shia whispered suggestively near his ear, "If you fail to uphold your end of the bargain, I will own you either way."

"I will have no complaints..." Levi replied peacefully.

Chapter 13 - A Movement From The Shadows.

After harvesting the crystallized seeds, Shia's party continued through towards the depths of the Harrowing Forest. Unfortunately, their luck hadn't turned around.

They still hadn't discovered a single Blood Crystal Flower or even other natural dimensional treasures. Yet, none of them were disheartened.

They understood that natural dimensional treasures were highly sought after by both nightcrawlers and humans. After all, nightcrawlers needed them for evolution even if they weren't contracted.

As for humans? Besides the known use for evolution, those natural treasures opened a path to many miracles. In addition, they could be sold or used to ask for favors if offered to the Solar Aegis Sanctuary depending on their rarity.

For such well-desired treasures, it was only normal for the previous Nightcrawler Nest to hoard them and for the Sunstrike Agency to clear them out, leaving only some crumbs for the rogue explorers.

Hours went by and before long, Shia's party had made it to the center of the Harrowing Forest.

As they walked past a thick bush, the party was exposed to a stunning scene.

"Woah...Is that an umbrella?" Arthur exclaimed, his pupils widened to the limit at the sight of a gigantic broken-apart umbrella on top of a destroyed hill.

The entire area was destroyed as trees were uprooted, boulders shattered, and even hills broke apart, leaving behind crumbled cliffs.

The umbrella was crafted out of black wood and was split apart into tens of pieces, lying all over the place.

If it wasn't for the canopy and the shaft being relatively near each other, giving the shape of a broken umbrella, Arthur wouldn't have guessed it.

"Using a black wooden umbrella for protection from the sun above their nest." Sergio sneered, "They are even stealing our products and using them in their favor."

"I would take an umbrella any day than a sealed dome of darkness," Shia commentated as she walked towards the ruined nest.

"Dome of darkness?" Arthur tilted his head in confusion, "Is it what I am thinking?"

"How can you not know this?" Levi frowned, "Are you sleeping through your classes?"

"Cough, I just forget easily."

Levi knew that he was lying through his teeth. But, all he could do was sigh helplessly at his brother's pure hatred for studying.

"You know that nightcrawler nests are separated by their sizes, the number of nightcrawlers, the average nest tier, and lastly the highest tier?" Levi asked.

"I know that much." Arthur answered, seemingly insulted by the question.

Levi's eyelids twitched at his tone and continued, "Well, there is a hidden criterion to judge a nest's true danger level...It's their protective measure against the sunlight."

"In the case of a nest with a fifteen-kilometer surface area, Tier 5 nightcrawler as its ruler, and above hundred nightcrawlers as the troops, they are named Shadow Castles like this one."

"But, in some rare cases, the same conditions might be met, yet, the nest would be much more dangerous than a Shadow Castle." Levi paused, "All because of the nest protective measures."

"You mean this umbrella isn't that good?" Arthur raised an eyebrow in surprise, "Based on its shaft's height, I believe it should at least cast a protective shadow over five kilometers of surface area."

"I never said it was bad, but it's nowhere near as overwhelming as a Dome of Darkness." Levi shared as he looked above him, "Imagine if this entire forest was covered in a dome of black wood? What agency would dare challenge it on their own even if they knew that the nest was a Shadow Castle?"

"I see." Arthur nodded.

While he may not know as much as his brother, he understood that if a territory was obscured in darkness for a long time, the corruption seeping from the Shadow dimension was multiplied by ten if not more!

He knew that when a certain degree of corruption was achieved, the entire environment would become a permanent part of the Shadow dimension!

The shadow dimension's atmosphere was extremely deadly to citizens and even low-leveled Daywalkers.

In other words, those domes of darkness were nothing but a death trap even if the nests were categorized as Shadow Castle or a Midnight Dominion.

"For a non-Daywalker, you sure know a lot." Jamal smiled after listening to Levi's whole explanation.

"I read, a lot." Levi smiled back.

"Enough chitchat and start searching for the flowers," Shia ordered sternly, "Mantis' group will move at dawn. We have a few hours at best before the forest turns into a stew of Daywalkers."

"On it."

The squad got busy immediately, leaving Levi sitting alone in the center of their search zone.

After finding out his special ability, he was entrusted fully with scouting ahead and alarming them if any nightcrawlers' were nearby. Their journey to the center wouldn't have gone so smoothly if it wasn't for him.

While the party was racing against time, an army was being prepared at the gates of the Outpost under Mantis' leadership.

At the moment, he was giving a speech while standing above a box, facing the crowd.

"Listen up people, Lord Darius and his Honored Raid squad have already gotten the difficult part out of the way." He uttered proudly, "Getting rid of the Shadow Castle that has been terrorizing the southern borders of our precious Holy Region."

"Long live the Sunstrike Agency! Long live Lord Darius!"

"Long live the Sunstrike Agency! Long live Lord Darius!"

The daywalkers associated with the Sunstrike agency didn't hesitate to shout out loudly amongst the crowd, pride covering their expressions.

The rest of the daywalkers might not have shown a similar zealous reaction, but they did give out nods of appreciation.

"All we have to do now is to clear the Harrowing Forest and close up all the remaining Stygian Gates to reclaim the territory."

"We planned on moving at dawn, but since everyone is already here, and I don't expect any new arrivals, we will immediately commence the follow-up expedition." Mantis inquired, "Does anyone have a problem with that?"

Seeing that the majority of Daywalkers shook their heads, Mantis turned around and walked towards the closed shut gate.

The Daywalkers formed a long queue behind him since they all needed to have their Daywalkers' IDs checked by the guards.

In a short while, everyone was out of the Outpost and summoned their Nightmounts. Some used similar nightcrawlers as mounts and some possessed unique ones, drawing the envy of those nearby.

"Move out!"

Mantis shouted with his feminine voice as he extended his hand towards the forest.

Dust clouds rose as more than a hundred Daywalkers rode in one massive group. Although most of them were considered Rookie and Junior Daywalkers, their numbers were large enough to strike terror even on a Tier 4 nightcrawler!

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Meanwhile, at the far back of the army, an average-looking tan-skinned girl with long brunette hair styled into a ponytail was riding on a black fox.

'The preys are on the move.'

As her honey-brown eyes scanned her nearby peers, they turned pitch-black for a split second before returning to normal.

"Malak, what are you doing so far behind?" A nice-looking teenager approached her with a charming smile. He was blonde and had piercing blue eyes, a typical handsome European boy.

He was riding on a metallic armored camel, yet, his speed was matching the frontrunners easily.

"Danny, you know my dust allergies will act up if I get too close to the group." Malak blushed, lowering her head.

"Haha, my bad, my bad." Danny offered with a chuckle, "You wanna ride with me? I will shield you with my life from the havoc of dust."

The nearest squad rolled their eyes at his corniness, believing that he was going to strike out...But, to their surprise, Malak agreed with a shy head nod.

"Tsk, they weren't lying when they said that if a girl wants you, it takes minimum effort to bag her."

"Heh, Matthew, this is enough to show you that it's time to give up on your crush. No amount of flowers and love letters will fix your busted face."

"F*ck off, at least I wasn't cheated on."

"You little..."

"Ouch, he aimed under the belt."

The Daywalkers teased each other as they watched Malak jump over Danny's camel and reseal her fox inside the Sealing Totem.

While those two were experiencing a Dawn of Romance under the envious looks of their peers, the telepathic message had already reached its destination.

At the depth of the underground, five kilometers away from the Harrowing Forest, a sea of nightcrawlers were seen huddled up together in a massive dimly-lighted cave.

Most of the nightcrawlers were Tier 1/Tier 2, and of the same spider archetype.

They had eight hairy legs, eight crimson eyes, and long clawed teeth reaching the ground. The clawed teeth clicked together, creating a disturbing noise across the cave.

"Settle down my children, settle down...Our time to feast is within reach..."

Chapter 14 - Queen Dra'Webra.

Suddenly, an enticing melodious voice resonated from above, calming the agitated army of spiders.

As the noise died out, the voice owner moved past the dim light, casting a horrific shadow of a humongous Queen Spider tiptoeing on a complicated web.

But then, a single web line fell from the ceiling and what came down wasn't the giant horrific spider Queen. But, a stunning blue-skinned curvy humanoid female with violet wavy hair, two dark red eyes, and smooth violet fur covering her private parts.

If one looked at her from the front, they would be absolutely smitten as no monstrous qualities were displaced.

However, the moment they looked at her back, their hearts would be chilled at the size of her abdomen attached to her tailbone.

As Queen Dra'Webra sat in midair, crossing her muscular lean legs, another telepathic message resounded in her mind...This time, the voice was rough and rugged.

'Queen Dra'Webra, everything is going according to the plan. The Daywalkers will reach the Harrowing Forest in less than an hour.'

'How about those early vermins, and especially the red haired girl? Have they perished yet?'

'No, they have already reached the center of the forest. Our ambushes fail every time like they have a great detection skill.'

Queen Dra'Webra frowned in displeasure.

Seemingly sensing her dissatisfaction, the messenger hastily tried to appease her.

'My Queen, I will make sure they will be the first to die. We will move once the forest is sealed. No one and nothing will ruin your precious feast.'

'Nel'Vass, words mean nothing to me.' Queen Dra'Webra uttered icily, 'Bring me results, or you will be the appetizer to my children.'

'Understood...'

Meanwhile, at the depths of the fallen Shadow Castle nest, a devilish humanoid goat with two curvy horns and a long shadowy goatee was seen sitting on a chair made out of rocks.

He was tapping his finger on the armchair with an irked expression.

'Dra'Webra is merciless and loyal only to her hunger. She didn't hesitate to weaken my Lord's nest and leak the information to the humans just to bait the follow-up Daywalker cleaners and feast on them.' He thought to himself, cold sweat covering his back.

'She is a true demon and if I were to mess up her feast, she won't hesitate to eat my crystallized seed.'

Nel'Vass was the only surviving intelligent Tier 3 nightcrawler from the Shadow Castle nest. He didn't survive because he was lucky, he betrayed his own nest after watching with his own eyes how Queen Dra'Webra manhandled his Lord.

In the world of nightcrawlers, there was no such thing as ultimate loyalty, only fear and respect for absolute strength.

The moment Nel'Vass saw what happened to his Lord, his respect turned into scorn, and he didn't hesitate to jump boats.

While this had saved him from falling with the nest, his treatment under Queen Dra'Webra was even worse than a Tier 1 nightcrawler.

That's because Queen Dra'Webra wasn't following the same nesting system as other nightcrawlers, where the nightcrawler's tier and his achievements defined his hierarchy standing within the nest.

She was considered a Lurker Nightcrawler, who hunted after both humans and nightcrawlers to fulfill her hunger, evolution, and her children's endless appetite.

In other words, Nel'Vass understood that his worth in her eyes was next to nothing unless he proved himself.

'F*ck, if I can't even take out a bunch of kids, I might as well commit suicide.' Nel'Vass' expression turned sinister.

...

A while later, the sun was peeking over the horizon, offering its rays of hope and safety.

Shia lifted her head and glanced at the sky slowly being painted in lavender as the first light scattered over the hills.

"Mantis' party must have already reached the forest." Shia rubbed her tired eyelids, "Let's take a rest for two hours. Use SR Drops and get some sleep. I will take the first shift."

Although Daywalkers didn't need the medication to get a natural eight hours of sleep due to their contracted nightcrawler's protection, they still relied on the SR pills heavily.

After all, a two hour of induced coma that provided an equal rest to a six-hour sleep was a true hack in life.

Unfortunately, those free hours of the day didn't come free of cost...

"I can't believe we haven't found a single Blood Crystal Flower." Jamal sighed as he sat down on the ground, feeling disheartened.

"Now, it will be more annoying with Mantis' army snooping everywhere." Sergio kicked a rock in irritation.

"Don't be discouraged." Shia replied calmly, "We did find some seeds at least. If we get unlucky for an entire week straight, we will leave with the forest's soil and give it to my family's botanists to grow me the flowers I need."

"For the rest of the materials, I will just find a way to buy them from the Sunstrike agency. They must have an overstock."

"Wait, this isn't part of the deal." Arthur immediately protested, "Even I know rare graded natural treasures take months to grow at their optimal environment."

"You don't have to worry, your brother will get his recommendation...He made sure of it in the contract." Shia glanced at Levi, who was sitting alone against a tree in silence.

"Oh yea, I forgot..."

After hearing this, Arthur's shitty memory acted up and made him remember the term she was referring to in the contract.

The term forced Shia to fulfill her part of the deal and help Levi participate in the upcoming assembly, even if his method hadn't been checked out yet. After all, it wasn't his problem if Shia failed to collect the materials in the next two months.

"You guys have drops or pills?" Shia asked the Larson Brothers.

"We have neither." Arthur lied through his teeth shamelessly.

Unbothered, Shia threw a pill bottle to Arthur and said, "Keep it with you."

"Woah..." Arthur's eyes gleamed in delight, 'We got two bottles in one day? Life is good.'

Then, he went to feed his brother a pill, but he rejected it.

"It's okay, I am not tired, I will take the first shift with Shia." Levi smiled, "You should get some rest, you have been working tirelessly."

"This is nothing to what I do at the gym,"

Arthur smirked cockily as he flexed his massive muscles, annoying Jamal and Sergio with one move.

"Gym rat."

"Cocky asshole."

They mumbled under their breaths, not wanting to look jealous in front of Shia. Then, they pulled their own SR Drops and poured one drop on each eye.

They entered their tents and waited for the medication to take effect. Just like being drugged with anesthesia, in less than ten seconds, their eyes became too heavy to open. Once they were closed, their minds entered a mimicked deep sleep state.

Since this state lasted for less than two hours, they could dream all they wanted, and the nightcrawlers wouldn't bother them even if they had no contracted nightcrawler to keep watch.

Arthur soon joined them under his brother's insistence, leaving only Shia and Levi awake.

"Do you know anything about tracking?" Shia inquired curiously.

"I know a bit." Levi answered.

"Good, come help me throw Mantis off our back." Shia sneered, "I know that two-faced prick, he will come rushing here to screw with us."

"Oh, okay." Levi stood up, dusting his buttocks. Then, he asked one question, "Is there a tracker within his party?"

"That's the thing, he has a great tracker called Masai." Shia rubbed her eyebrows, "He is rarely wrong."

"I see." Levi smiled serenely, "Leave it to me then."

"Oh? You have something?" Shia raised an eyebrow in intrigue.

As Levi was sharing his plan with Shia, Mantis' massive raid finally reached the forest.

The moment they stepped inside, they separated into their chosen squads and each went to their designated location to avoid unnecessary conflicts. Mantis' main squad headed straight to the center of the forest.

"Shia's party must have already found something precious, we can't stop them, but we can slow them down." Mantis spoke coldly, though, his feminine voice wasn't helping.

If it was up to him, he wouldn't hesitate to eliminate her entire party and ensure that all the remaining treasures would go to his agency.

That's because he wasn't the one funding this expedition, but his agency. However, as its leader, he would be compensated heavily for each natural treasure found.

Unfortunately, it was difficult to make a move against another Daywalker when they were using the NeuraLens.

Those lenses were recording everything each second and transmitting the data to the cloud services of their respectful Holy Region, ensuring that the Daywalkers behave even in the wastelands.

The Daywalkers only agreed to such a breach of privacy due to the Nocturnal Contracts.

The staff responsible for those cloud services were under strict contractual bindings to not peer through anyone's data unless an anomaly occurred, and a warranty was used to extract the data.

Those were the precautions used to protect the Daywalkers from each other. But, if there were one thing humans were masters of, it was finding ways to adapt and bypass the rules...

Unfortunately for Mantis and his army, humans weren't the only ones with the cruel cunningness to harm their own race for selfish reasons...

'My Queen, your food is preparing itself neatly on the plate.' Malak shared with a sinister smile, her eyes turning pitch-black for a split second.

Danny felt a sudden chill on his back as he was riding his camel through the forest.

When he turned around, he noticed Malak's sweet smile while she looked at him...Immediately, the smile washed away the chill, leaving him to smile back, feeling butterflies in his stomach.

"Are you comfortable?" Danny asked while touching her arm.

"You have no idea..." Malak replied sweetly as she leaned against his back.

The same Daywalkers in their squad couldn't help but roll their eyes in annoyance and speed past them, incapable of taking in the cringe.

Chapter 15 - Getting Tracked Down.

Sometime later, Mantis and his main squad arrived at the location of the fallen Shadow Castle nest.

It took them significantly less time than Shia's squad since they didn't dismount or stop once to search the traveled areas for the natural treasures.

"What a beautiful destruction." Mantis said in awe as he gazed at the ruined, closed-shut nightcrawler's nest.

"Our lord and his honored squad have ensured no nest revival occurs." One of his squadmates uttered proudly.

While they couldn't see past the destroyed cave, they were certain that most if not all the underground network of the nest was completely obliterated.

This was a must-have procedure in any expedition since those caves and tunnels were considered Stygian gates and would attract the nightcrawlers in great numbers.

If any passing intelligent nightcrawler noticed such a gathering of low-tiered nightcrawlers and a perfectly sound tunneling network, they wouldn't hesitate to make it their new nest.

Thus, both the government and the agencies had to ensure the removal of any chance of a nest revival.

Suddenly, Mantis' attention was attracted to cleaned-up half-covered footsteps, leading to the northern side of the forest.

"Masai, look here."

He called for the party's tracking expert to check the trail.

A well-built dark-skinned man with a great hairline and a pierced ear crouched next to the trail. Then, he looked in the direction of the footsteps with a deep frown.

Not saying much, he followed the track for a few seconds and then came back with the same expression.

"What's the issue?" Mantis inquired.

"The trail makes no sense." Masai clarified with a rugged tone, "There are no additional marks left after the footsteps. No broken twigs, no crushed leaves, no disturbed bushes. Nothing."

"Are you saying Shia have left behind a decoy footprint to throw us off their trail?" Mantis knitted his eyebrows.

"Either that or they have cleared their path after leaving behind those footprints." Masai shook his head, "No one that careful will leave behind such a footprint."

"It's a decoy, I am certain." Mantis smirked, "I know that arrogant b*tch will try everything in her power to keep me away from messing with her quest."

"If you say so." Masai stood up and looked around him, "Spread out and search for any trails, and be careful not to ruin them."

Mantis' main squad consisted of ten Daywalkers, including him and Masai. Thus, it shouldn't take them long to find clues with this much manpower.

As expected, after ten minutes of scrutinizing the entire place, a squad mate whistled twice, attracting everyone's attention to him.

Mantis and Masai paid him a visit, and they were shown a small heap of leaves shattered and digging deep into the mud. While the footprint was barely visible as the wind had already ruined most of it, for experts like Masai, it was more than enough.

"47 shoe size." Masai murmured as he measured the hidden footprint, "I believe I have seen a giant muscular dude in their squad."

"Yes, she did have two civilians accompanying her." Mantis nodded, "One is blind and one resembles a tank."

"This is it then."

Masai gestured for the rest of the squad to gather...Then, they followed closely behind him.

While they moved slowly, Masai was continuing to find new tracks, always left behind by Arthur.

"The others are excellent at hiding their tracks, but there isn't much they can do about a walking unexperienced behemoth." Masai shared while increasing his pace, sure that he was on the right path.

Unfortunately, if there was a camera above the forest, and it panned out, they would be shocked to find themselves moving in a different direction from Shia's party!

To be precise, Shia's party was moving in the direction of the first located footprints, heading north of the forest!

"Are you sure your strategy didn't make it worse?" Sergio asked for the hundredth time as he looked behind, paranoid that he would get jumped at any moment.

"You worry too much." Levi said calmly, "If their tracker truly was great at his craft, he would easily notice that our original tracks are fake. This will drive them to search for additional tracks. Once they find my brother's 'naturally' crafted footprint, they will believe our track is a decoy even more and will commit to the actual fake trail."

"As they go deeper and Masai sees the additional bits and pieces, he would become more certain until..."

On the other side...

"What's wrong?" Mantis frowned after noticing that Masai had stopped and seemed a bit confused.

"Nothing, the way is here."

Masai nodded and then continued heading deeper on the eastern side of the forest. Though, a sweat drop was falling down his forehead.

'Where is the rest of the trail? Did I lose their track? Did I miss something and take the wrong way? It can't be.' Masai glanced above him, 'Did they go airborne or something? Shia does have an eagle as a mount. Or, wait a second...Don't tell me the first track was a fake decoy and that they were daring enough to place it and head in the exact same path?'

Masai soon shook his head, removing this foolish idea from his mind.

'I am overthinking it. Shia isn't that shrewd or crazy to risk using reverse psychology on me when she has never met me before.'

'A trail is bound to surface sooner or later.'

Ten minutes later...Nothing.

'Where is it, where is it!'

Meanwhile, Mantis and the rest of his squad were following his lead blindly, even chatting here and there like they were on a safari.

Another ten minutes...

'Where the f*ck is it? Have they teleported? There isn't even the aftermath of searching for the treasures!'

Alas, his failure was finally starting to show externally as he was losing his cool before his squad and mumbling all the time with sweat drenching his entire face.

In the end, Mantis couldn't hold it and had to ask him.

"Masai, you know the way, right?"

"..."

Masai remained silent.

"Right??!" Mantis repeated with more emphasis, his expression turning slowly dark.

"Sorry boss, I think, I think we are lost..." Masai confessed at last with a defeated expression.

Silence engulfed the party, killing the chill chatter immediately.

A moment later, Mantis snapped furiously, "What the f*ck do you mean we are lost?"

"I don't know, I genuinely don't know." Masai covered his face in shame, "They must have left double decoys. One at the start, and the second one we committed on. After we went deeper, Shia must have taken everyone airborne one by one and dropped them off in a different location."

"Are you telling me we have been following a dead track for the last half an hour?" Mantis gritted his teeth.

Masai leaned against a tree in silence.

A moment later...

"MOTHERF*CKER!"

A thunderous feminine curse traveled across the forest and forced nearby birds to...well, remain in their places as the curse carried not a hint of threat in it.

Meanwhile, many kilometers away, Levi was on the final notes of his explanation.

"They will assume Shia's eagle was used before considering the first decoy to be a real trail since it was simply too much of a risk to use reverse psychology when many other options are left." Levi smiled innocently as he held his brother's forearm, who was leading him at the back of the party.

"Everything you have said is heavily reliant on Masai's personality and tracking skills." Sergio frowned, "How can you be so sure that he will do exactly what you prescribed when you have never seen the dude?"

Levi went silent for a moment before answering calmly, "You don't need to see or know a person by heart to predict his actions. You just need to trust that he will stay true to his nature and set of skills."

Shia, Sergio, and Jamal couldn't help but turn around and glance at Levi in a daze.

As they watched him walk on uneven grounds and sometimes even trip and get pulled by his brother under his constant reminders, they didn't know how to react.

But, Blee'der knew how.

"Boy, your maturity is too creepy for your age."

"I hear that a lot." Levi chuckled.

- US Size: 13

UK Size: 12

Chapter 16 - The Bait, The Trap, The Horror. I

Although Levi's plan was sound and he seemed confident in it, Jamal was still ordered to use his spiritual arrow to scout around them every once in a while. After all, Mantis wasn't the only one in the forest.

Fortunately, no one appeared in his arrow's field of vision.

When he relayed the news, Shia ordered everyone to start searching the area for natural treasures again. She still hadn't lost hope even when the center of the forest turned out to be a bust.

Since the forest was quite humongous with hills, lakes, and rivers, it would be hard to meet Shia's party randomly although Mantis' party had more than a hundred Daywalkers.

In addition, everyone was too focused on finding natural treasures to bother themselves with antagonizing Shia's party.

Mantis couldn't make such an order when the contract details involved only finding the treasures.

Thus, hours went by in peace, and before long, the sun was showering everyone with its final rays of light.

"Prepare your nightwear straps and light sticks."

Mantis ordered with an irritated look, knowing that it was near impossible to find Shia anymore unless they dropped everything and completely focused on her.

As the night veil fell over the forest and the moon cast its gentle light from the slight gaps of the clouds, only small dots of light were seen spread out across the forest.

Sometime later...

"Is it just me or is the forest somewhat too peaceful?" Masai murmured while looking around him, not spotting a single roaming nightcrawler.

"Are you doubting my agency's capabilities?" Mantis frowned coldly, "You think we are some kind of second-rated agency that doesn't clear the enti...."

Skritch-skritch...

Suddenly, a faint rustling noise echoed in everyone's ears akin to tiny legs skittering over dried leaves.

"Shshe."

Mantis silenced everyone with a finger near his mouth and leaned closer to the noise. As he focused on it, it started to get louder and louder until it resounded akin to the thundering steps of a thousand army!

Then, they appeared, a sea of horrific big spiders charging in their direction, covering their entire field of sight!

"Ru...Run..RUUUN!!!"

Absolutely petrified, Mantis let out a high-pitched scream while sprinting at the top of his speed in the opposite direction of the spiders!!

"WHAT THE HELL!!!"

"HOW COME THERE ARE SO MANY SPIDERS!"

Masai and the rest of the squad didn't linger for even a moment as they took off after Mantis while summoning their signature weapons.

All of them shared similar expressions: horror, disbelief, and confusion.

Unfortunately, no one was there to clarify their questions as this exact scenario was repeating across the entire forest!

Meanwhile, Shia's party was still working tirelessly, turning everything upside down, but to no avail.

"I am starting to think that those flowers have gone extinct." Arthur wiped his forehead in annoyance.

"They are called treasures for a reason, Arthy. If they were..."

Levi's smile suddenly turned upside down after spotting a bizarre moving spiritual wave at a rapid speed.

When he focused hard on it, he finally managed to see some distinctive features of spiders.

He stood up immediately and warned with a solemn tone, "An uncanny number of spiders are approaching us. We have to leave, now!"

"Wait what?"

"Spiders? It can't be? This region isn't known to harbor any spider archetype."

Sergio and Jamal commentated in confusion, but Levi had no plans to explain the situation. He called for his brother and Arthur swiftly took hold of him, giving him a piggyback. Then, he sprinted in the opposite direction, not waiting for anyone to react!

When sh*t hit the fan, the Larson brothers only cared about protecting each other.

After Shia saw his extreme reaction and knew that he wasn't the type to mess around, she swiftly summoned her weapon and took off after them.

This left Jamal and Sergio to glance at each other in a daze for a few seconds. But then, their ears picked up on the creepy rustling sound; an unfamiliar noise in a silent forest.

"WAIT FOR US!!"

Scared shitless, they dropped everything and chased after their party, regrouping in no time.

ARGH!! NOO!!! SAVE MEE!!!

Before Shia could ask Levi about what he saw in detail, a distant symphony of cries and screams engulfed the forest, sending chills coursing down everyone's spines.

"What's going on?!" Arthur asked, agitated.

"How the f*ck will I know?!"

Shia replied with a grim look while glancing behind her, noticing thousands of crimson dots through the darkness. They were too close to their comfort.

Meanwhile, many thoughts were roaming through Levi's mind, trying his best to keep his cool in such a dangerous situation.

As he listened to the agonizing and despairing screams echoing across the forest, he understood that it was impossible for the timing to be this perfect; that all of them were ambushed at once.

This made him realize that the spiders were following orders and that this entire ambush was organized by an intelligent entity.

'In public records, the Harrowing Forest Shadow Castle nest was under the leadership of a nightcrawler from the Groot-Goat archetype, which meant most of the nightcrawlers under him should be of a similar archetype for easier control.'

Levi understood that nightcrawlers respected each other's authority following two options; either they were of the same archetype or the tier difference was beyond three.

In simpler terms, a Tier 4 nightcrawler could command with absolute authority a Tier 1 nightcrawler of any species, but if they were of the same species, just being two tiers higher would give them the same absolute authority.

That's why most nightcrawlers' nests were usually filled with similar archetypes for easier management.

'This means those spiders didn't belong to the nest and are under a whole different entity. In other words...'

Levi's skin felt cold all of a sudden after it finally hit him.

'We are being hunted by a Lurker Spider Queen...'

Even Levi, who was almost always composed and fearless, couldn't help but feel dread creeping up on his heart.

He had read that Lurker nightcrawlers were a minimum Tier 5 since they needed to be powerful to protect themselves from other nightcrawlers too.

To be hunted by a rogue Tier 5 nightcrawler? This was scarier than going on an expedition!

"We have to leave the forest, now!!!" He shouted, his face as pale as a sheet of paper.

"Did you find something?" Shia frowned.

Just as Levi was about to give her a brief version of his findings, his spiritual vision detected a pincer assault of another wave of spiders, coming from the front and sides!

It was like everywhere he looked, the only thing in his field of vision was disorganized shadowy spiritual waves. Though the numbers varied extensively.

"We are surrounded! Head east and prepare for battle!"

Hearing Levi's orders, Arthur didn't even question his brother. He changed his direction abruptly, using a boulder to kick off it, and launched himself with minimized monument loss.

Such a maneuver would have ruined any normal person's knees, but Arthur's muscles weren't purely for strength purposes as he was as extremely flexible too!

Shia and the others swiftly caught up to them and took the lead, forming the same battle formation with the Larson Brothers in the center.

In a few moments at best, everyone finally saw what Levi warned them about as a dozen giant hideous hairy spiders entered their illumination strip range!

"It's Flesh Eating Spiders!"

Sergio's expression turned ugly immediately. He knew that those little bastards loved eating the flesh of their prey while still alive.

Most nightcrawlers prioritized killing their prey first to ensure a comfortable feasting experience, but those monsters couldn't care less.

"Pierce through them!" Shia shouted, "Jamal!"

Knowing what she wanted, Jamal pulled the bow from his back and aimed at the biggest gathering of spiders in front. Then, he fired an arrow of concentrated spiritual energy at them.

"PIERCING SHOCKDART!"

Before his agitated holler could reach the ears of his party members, the arrow pierced through the first spider, the second, the third, and everything in its path!

BOOM!!

Then, a split second later, a thundering shockwave was emitted in its path, hurling the closest spiders away, and throwing them against trees!

"The hell!"

Arthur watched with his jaw dropped at the cleared path before them.

During most of their battles in the forest, Shia took care of everything, leaving Jamal to use his energy purely to scout. Only now, did he realize that Jamal was capable of carrying his own weight too.

"The path is clear, but the other waves are joining together." Levi shared with a solemn tone, "If they were to catch us, it won't end pretty."

The constant cries and screams of other Daywalkers supported Levi's claim, leaving everyone with ugly expressions at such a disturbing development.

"This is beyond the norm, we have to call for reinforcement."

Without waiting for permission, Sergio requested Astra Ai to declare an emergency and request reinforcement from the closest outpost.

Although they were in a private agency, they were entitled to receive governmental aid in such emergencies. Alas, the answer he received drained the color out of his chubby face.

-Astra's services are offline, please reconnect.-

-Astra's services are offline, please reconnect.-

Each time he called for her, the same message resounded in his ear. Not daring to believe it, Sergio pressed a button on his earpiece and a tiny hologram appeared at the side of his vision. When he saw an X mark on the signal bars, his soul almost left his body.

"Did you call for help?" Shia inquired.

"The...the signal is off..." Sergio stuttered, pure dread engulfing his expression.

The moment everyone heard him, they swiftly checked their own devices and ended up with the same discovery.

"Someone is jamming the signal..."

Chapter 17 - The Bait, The Trap, The Horror. II

Levi felt a chill course his spine after realizing that their situation was far from a random hunting mission by a Lurker Spider Queen.

This ambush was orchestrated with either someone on the inside, or the Lurker Spider Queen must have landed on a signal jammer.

In both scenarios, it didn't look good for them.

"Keep going east, the moment we put a decent distance, we will summon our mounts and leave this place!" Shia ordered coldly, not showing an ounce of panic.

If it was up to her, she would have already summoned her eagle and at least helped the Larson Brothers get out of the forest.

Unfortunately, the summoning of totem mounts required fifteen seconds minimum while using low graded sealing totems. At the moment, they didn't even have a couple of seconds to scratch their heads.

While every single squad was trying their best to reach out to their private agencies, their families, or authorities to rescue them, Nel'Vass was seen standing at the highest point in the forest...The destroyed shaft of the wooden black umbrella.

He was crouching with his elbows placed on his knees while carrying a small silver device in his right hand.

The device was square-shaped and had a long antenna, beeping once every couple of seconds.

'How did Dra'Webra get her hands on this?' Nel'Vass wondered while toying with the device.

He had heard from his previous Lord that such devices were banned by the human race since they could do more than disrupt their towers' signals. If fallen into the wrong hands, they could be engineered to shut down electricity networks, power sources, defensive systems such as the Sun Disk, and more.

That's why those devices were halted from production many years ago and anyone found developing or in possession of one would be thrown in jail for a very long time.

'I know she is a Tier 5 powerhouse, but still...'

Nel'Vass rubbed his long goatee thoughtfully, knowing that it was extremely difficult for even high-ranked Daywalkers to get their hands on this device.

'She must have her own network within the human race.' Nel'Vass narrowed his eyes, 'Is killing that girl part of the feast or does it go much deeper?'

Soon, Nel'Vass shook his head, realizing that he was snooping into matters that might get him killed.

He returned to his main task, which was placing the signal jammer at the highest point of the forest to ensure that no one would get a connection.

After he was done, he looked in the direction of Shia's party and smiled sinisterly.

...

Boom! Boom!! Thud!!

On a different side of the forest, Mantis and his squadmates were seen fighting for their life after getting surrounded from all sides by the spiders' army.

Unlike Shia's party, they had no Levi to alert them in advance about the spiders' sneaky ambushes.

Sure, they had a scout in the party, but his abilities worked similarly to Jamal's. He needed to be stationary and have it active all the time, which was impossible considering the exertion it takes on his energy levels.

"Mounir! Help out Masai!"

"Don! Use your god-damn ultimate innate ability already!!"

"Nikii! Stop f*cking saving your Assault Totems and deal with your side!!"

"We have to break through! Fast!"

Mantis positioned himself on top of a tree above the chaotic battlefield underneath. He was scanning the entire field and giving out orders nonstop, helping the squad possess some form of teamwork.

Unfortunately, he could see that his efforts were for naught as the sea of spiders was simply neverending.

The moment his team dealt with a group, they were jumped by three.

'F*ck, f*ck, f*ck, why the hell is this happening in my first leading mission?! Even the signal is cut off! Am I being set up?!

Mantis' expression kept turning ugly by the second, understanding that he would be responsible for everyone's death even when this situation wasn't his fault.

All due to the nocturnal contracts having a life insurance term in case a hired Daywalker died in a mission or an expedition.

He expected a couple of casualties here and there once he signed over a hundred Daywalkers, but as he listened to the nonstop pained cries in the forest he could tell that their situation was much worse than he could imagine.

'What do you think, Ti'nna?' Mantis asked for his partner's opinion.

'Advisor Alaric will kill you if you don't die fighting here.'

Mantis' expression turned desperate as he listened to his contracted nightcrawler, who resembled a humanoid curvy praying mantis. She had a slender figure covered in emerald-green chitin while her eyes glowed with a bioluminescent light.

'You can't even run away on your own. You have to act as a hero and save as many as possible. This is the only way to ensure you receive minimum punishment; maybe even rewarded once an investigation carries through.'

Mantis knew she was right. If it was possible, he would have already dipped, leaving everyone at the mercy of their destiny.

Sadly, the NeuraLens was still recording everything and storing it until the connection returned.

In other words, if he were to run away from his responsibilities, he would be exposed one way or another unless he destroyed his entire squad's NeuraLens devices.

This left him with two choices; either die trying to be a hero or survive and be punished as a villain.

'F*ck me...'

Mantis summoned his signature weapon. It resembled a praying mantis' forearms with thousands of sharp deadly teeth bent at a striking position(80-100°).

Then, with a look of utter despair mixed with anger, he pounced at the biggest gathering of spiders while shouting, "PRAYING MANTIS ARTS: A THOUSAND CUTS!"

His body suddenly disappeared midair, turning into a shadowy mirage with hundreds of green blades appearing here and there. Each time a blade appeared, a spider was sliced in half or had its head severed!

Slice! Slice! Slice!...

The rest of the squad watched in astonishment as Mantis singlehandedly took down more than twenty spiders in no time, creating a path to freedom from corpses!

"WHAT ARE YOU STANDING FOR?! FOLLOW ME!"

Not waiting for anyone, Mantis took the lead and charged headfirst into the incoming next wave of spiders, his body, and weapon already tainted with sticky nasty juices.

But, he couldn't care less. His bloodshot eyes reflected nothing but a strong desire to survive at all costs!

While the hundred Daywalkers were fighting for their lives in the depths of the Harrowing Forest, peaceful silence engulfed the outpost. Most of the traffic in outposts was related to Daywalkers.

Since the majority had already departed, the outpost was mostly occupied by government staff and guards.

"Micky, keep watch, I am going for a walk." The smoker guard shared lazily while standing up from his chair.

"But, sir Feng Ling..." Micky gulped a mouthful, "You were assigned to guard the outpost as a disciplinary punishment...If you leave, they can track your location and accuse you of breaking your penalty."

"Ah, how bothersome..." Feng Ling rubbed his eyelids and said, "Fine, I will just smoke on top of the tower."

"But..."

Before Micky could add anything, Feng Ling took a single step forward and suddenly disappeared, leaving behind him a mere cool breeze like he was never there.

Micky lifted his head and gazed at the top of the Sun Disk Tower with an awed expression.

"So freaking cool..." Micky murmured, "If only he wasn't reckless and insubordinate; he would have been promoted to a Gove...Ay, I am not in a position to judge anyone."

Meanwhile, at the highest point of the Sun Disk tower, Feng Ling was seen sitting with one hand above his knee while dangling the other leg.

He was trying to light up a cigarette, but it was too windy at such a height.

"Halt."

With a single order, the wind suddenly froze around him. Then, Feng Ling ignited the cigarette in a single attempt and took a deep breath until the tip turned bright red. Immediately after he exhaled a cloud of smoke, the wind unfroze and took it away.

"That's the good stuff." Feng Ling showed a cozy smile as he gazed at the magnificent view around him.

However, as his eyes landed on the Harrowing Forest, he couldn't help but knit his eyebrows in confusion.

'Mao, are you seeing what I am seeing?'

Chapter 18 - Death Cocoon.

A pitch-black cat emerged from his tie and sat on top of his shoulder. She had long thick whiskers, making her resemble an old bearded cat.

When she glanced lazily in the direction of the Harrowing forest, her dark slit opened up widely, reflecting an abnormal scene.

A gigantic, almost invisible web of walls surrounded the entire forest's borders and seemingly grew taller each second, desiring to meet at the top.

If it weren't for the moonlight being reflected once in a while by the web threads, no one would be able to see them even if they were close!

"Woah...It's a Death Cocoon." Mao clicked her tongue, "Your little fellas' luck sure is rubbish..."

Before she completed her sentence, Feng Ling had already taken off towards the Harrowing Forest with an icy grimace.

He was kicking the wind like he was bouncing off solid surfaces, each kick sent him flying for more than hundreds of meters. His speed was enough to put even Shia's eagle to shame!

'Why the hell is there a Lurker Spider Queen nearby, and how come no one has reached out for reinforcement?'

Although Feng Ling knew that the moment the Death Cocoon appeared, it was already too late to ask for reinforcement, he was still confused.

'Is she in possession of a signal jammer or did she already slaughter everyone before they can make contact?'

He doubted the latter was true as he knew that Lurker Spider Queens seldom made their move personally unless threatened or forced. They always leave it to their armies of spiderlings.

This made him assume that she was using a signal jammer, which was going to change the whole narrative of this ambush.

'Astra, call for a code purple to the capital. Location: Harrowing Forest. I might go offline soon.'

The moment he finished his report, Feng Ling narrowed his eyes and increased his speed to the limit, leaving behind mere windy figures.

'Maybe, it's not too late...I might save a few.'

As this thought took root, an image of Levi surfaced in Feng Ling's mind. It wasn't of their last meeting at the gate, but of the first time he had ever met him.

The day he was still an Anti-Sleepwalker Officer and responded to an abnormal electrical activity in a house within Tamara's upper neighborhood.

He could never forget that day and the horror he had seen in that house...

'I might save him this time...'

A few minutes ago...

Shia's party was still being hunted by an ever-growing army of spiders, who never seemed to get tired or lost.

Although Levi was acting as the perfect radar, helping them avoid the largest group of spiders and choose the weakest one to pierce through, the morale was at an all-time low.

Every one of them knew that it was going to be extremely challenging to reach the eastern borders of the forest without exhausting every bit of their stamina.

"The Flesh Eaters have heat vision. We might never leave enough distance to summon the mounts in peace." Levi frowned. "We have to change our plan."

"I am all ears for suggestions," Shia responded while grasping tightly onto a necklace with a flaring sun symbol.

"We need fifteen seconds at minimum to summon the mounts." Levi glanced at the spiritual wave behind them and guessed, "I assume thirty meters are separating us. Based on their constant speed, if we were to stop, they would reach us in five seconds. This means we have to create a distraction good enough to buy us more than ten seconds."

"What kind of distraction are you talking about?" Sergio inquired while sweating heavily, his big belly flapping all over the place.

Although he looked unhealthy and unathletic, he was somehow capable of keeping up with the squad's speed.

In fact, he was doing much better than Jamal, who was huffing and puffing like he was going to collapse at any given moment.

When it came to Daywalkers, appearances were deceiving.

"We need something strong enough to break them off the Lurker Spider Queen's authority." Levi said.

He had already updated them about the true intentions of those spiders and the actual gravity of their situation...Knowing that a Lurker Spider Queen was hunting after them was enough to scare anyone straight.

Thus, even when it looked like Levi had taken leadership of the group, none of them dared to complain. The only thing coursing through their minds was to survive this hellhole.

"Purified sunlight." Shia shared sternly, "If we threw at them all of our growth totems and Luminus snacks, I am certain they will fight amongst each other to eat them."

"My thoughts exactly." Levi nodded in approval.

He understood that only purified sunlight was capable of breaking low-tiered nightcrawlers from their masters' authority briefly...Especially if it was in abundance.

It was like putting a delicious snack in front of a starving dog who hadn't eaten in many days. Even if he was well-trained, his survival instincts would instantly take the wheel.

"F*ck, even our growth totems?" Sergio's expression turned ugly as he glanced at his backpack.

His reaction was understandable when considering that those growth totems were used by Daywalkers to accelerate feeding their Shadowlife Seeds with sunlight.

The Shadowlife Seeds were in every Nightcrawler, and they were the singular 'organ' responsible for their lifespan, evolution, intelligence, strength, life, and death.

It was everything to a nightcrawler, and now, it had become everything to humans as well. But, more on that later...

"Fine, save them, the spiders will surely enjoy adding them as snacks while they feast on your corpse." Shia said coldly while letting go of the necklace.

"Damn it, if this doesn't work, my vengeful soul will haunt this forest for eternity!"

Sergio seemed on the verge of tears as he reached out to his backpack, pulling two pouches. One was filled with Luminus snacks and the other with Growth totems.

Jamal brought out his own, and they handed them to Shia mid-sprint. Shia evaded a tree and glanced at the contents of the pouches. When she noticed the quantity and quality of the growth totems, her eyelids twitched.

"Are you withholding?"

"No? Why?"

"Never mind, this is good enough."

She poured everything into a single pouch, and then she pressed them together, activating all the dormant Luminus snacks and totems, causing the pouch to shimmer brightly!

She traded glances with everyone, and when she saw Arthur tap on Levi's hand, she turned around and threw the pouch behind them.

"Prepare your Nightmounts!"

Sergio and Jamal pulled their sealing totems and held them tightly, awaiting Levi's call with looks of expectancy.

Although Levi had no vision of the pouch, he focused on the movement of the spiritual wave of spiders.

Meanwhile, the sea of spiders was as terrifying as ever; jumping on trees and walking on each other, uncaring about anything else but the moving humanoid heat auras before them.

It was like they were on a mission, and they would not stop until they fulfilled it. But, just as it seemed like their resolve was unchanging, a sudden, beautiful brilliance appeared in their sight.

Immediately after they saw the light, their Shadowlife seed tingled like crazy, sending electrifying shockwaves across their entire system.

Then, every single spider in the vicinity of the brilliant light let out a unified screech and charged toward it like they were injected with steroids!

The first spider to arrive sank its giant fangs into the pouch and swung its head, cutting the pouch in half and hurling all the activated Luminus snacks and growth totems everywhere!

The spiders halted their sprint and started fighting over every single piece, even biting each other to snatch it!

"It worked! Summon the mounts! Go! Go!"

Levi notified his squad the moment he saw the great disturbance amongst the spiders' army.

Shia, Sergio, and Jamal were clever enough to throw the sealing totems tens of meters away from them after uttering the incantation to ensure no second was lost!

The wooden sealing totems turned brighter and bigger in midair and even when they landed, the process still continued.

When Shia's party arrived near them, they counted the seconds with held breaths, waiting impatiently for the sealing totems to shatter.

"We will make it, the spiders are still fighting over the purified sunlight." Levi eased their worry while gazing at the disturbed spiritual wave.

As he claimed, the sealing totems shattered after a few rough moments, unveiling the three nightmounts to the world.

"Kairo, you ugly bastard! I never thought I will be happy..."

However, before Sergio could take a single step forward, a sudden aggressive whooshing sound was heard from above, attracting everyone's attention.

The moment they lifted their heads, it was already too late...

Chapter 19 - Cover My Back.

BOOOM!!!

Nel'Vass fell from the sky akin to a meteor amidst the summoned mounts. Arthur and the rest were forced to reflexively shield their heads as they got hurled in different directions from the powerful shockwave!

Timber, rocks, dirt, mud, everything was launched at a terrifying speed after them, bombarding them mid-flight!

Despite the sudden assault and pain, Arthur instinctively twisted in midair, causing Levi to take the hit on his back...But it spared him from crashing into the solid trunk of an oak tree.

Thuuud!!

Arthur flexed his muscles to the best of his ability, but the force was strong enough that it still knocked the air out of his chest.

As he fell to the ground, his bloodshot eyes protruded from their sockets while his mouth was wide open. Saliva coming out uncontrollably, but no air was coming in.

Just sharp exhales as he held onto his stomach tightly.

"Arthur!"

As Levi heard his brother's dry gasps, he completely forgot the scorching pain on his back after the bombardment.

He placed his hand on his brother's chest and started telling him to breathe slowly while massaging it, knowing that it wouldn't help much.

Meanwhile, Shia, Jamal, and Sergio had it better than them as the moment they were hit by the shockwave, each one used their defensive innate abilities to protect themselves.

Shia surrounded herself with crystallized blood armor, Jamal utilized a skin-tight spiritual barrier, and lastly, Sergio's fatty skin hardened into rocks.

They immediately recovered and entered a protective formation, putting Arthur and Levi in its center.

When Shia saw what happened to them, her expression turned bloodthirsty.

"Boys, are you alright?"

Arthur made an 'okay' gesture with his hand while taking deep breaths, appearing like he was about to die at any second.

"Don't mind us and focus on him! He must be a Tier 3 nightcrawler." Levi warned solemnly as he gazed at the terrifying spiritual gray aura in front of him.

He had learned a long ago that the intensity of spiritual auras defined the tier/rank of a nightcrawler or any of the Walkers.

He used a simple technique to figure out a nightcrawler's tier: If it was weak and fable, it must be a Tier 1 nightcrawler.

If it was intense but contained in the figure, it must be a Tier 3 nightcrawler. If it was in between, neither strong nor weak, it belonged to a Tier 2 nightcrawler.

As for the rest of the high-tiered Nightcrawlers? He had only seen upper-ranked daywalkers' spiritual auras, and it was always wild or contained to perfection.

When Shia and the rest heard that they might be dealing with a Tier 3 nightcrawler, their shoulders tensed up while eyeing the cloud of dust in front.

Nel'Vass' wavy shadow reflected behind the dusty cloud. He lifted his hands slowly and then, with a single clap, the dusty cloud was cleared out, exposing an unsightly scene.

The white-feathered eagle, the shadowy horse, and the blue-furred wolf were lying in a puddle of blood, torn flesh, and guts spilling everywhere...

Not a single twitch was spotted...They were utterly decimated inside a massive crater created by Nel'Vass.

"Sadly, you little children ain't going anywhere," Nel'Vass said casually while stretching his shoulder.

"Mira..."

Shia ignored him, her crimson-red eyes were affixed on the brutal state of her dearest mount.

She didn't need to hear her heartbeats to know that Mira was gone. The moment she died, the contractual link between them was cut off, causing the inked tattoo on her back to erase itself.

This happened to Sergio and Jamal as well, leaving their expression to turn gloomy.

"Sergio, Jamal, keep the brothers safe and buy me some time." Shia uttered coldly while walking towards Nel'Vass, holding her crescent-bladed glaive with both hands.

Seeing her current state, Sergio and Jamal knew that she was about to go all out. While they didn't know if it would be enough to deal with such a terrifying Tier 3 nightcrawler, they could only put their trust in her and fulfill their part.

"Jamal, cover my back."

Sergio extended his arm to the side, summoning a petrified cracked stone mace with a gleaming green light.

The moment he tightened his grip on it, his skin started turning into rock as well like he was touched by the curse of Medusa.

The transformation didn't stop until his entire body was armored from top to bottom with a rocky skin, leaving only his eyes.

Though he looked like a statue carved from stone, his movement was smooth as he swung his mace and rested it on his shoulder.

Then, without an ounce of hesitation, Sergio charged toward the spiders' army on his own, desiring to intercept them before they could get close and pincer his party!

"Sergio..."

Levi murmured as he watched Sergio's minuscule aura rushing toward an ocean of damnation...

Although he was giving him sh*t from the moment they met, Levi never took it to heart as he could tell that Sergio was simply a distrustful person.

Whether he was blind or not had nothing to do with his behavior since his brother had been taking the same sh*t from him.

But with time, his bad attitude lessened, and he started treating them as true members of his party after realizing that they were quite reliable even for citizens.

Rustle! Rustle!...

The moment the spiders finished feasting on the Growth totems and Luminus snacks, they switched their attention to the closest heat signal to them.

They saw only Shia, Levi, Arthur, Jamal, and Nel'Vess. Just as they let out an ear-piercing screech and tried to kickstart their chase, a deep rough voice resounded in their ears.

"Dark Stone Arts: Petrifying Touch."

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The armored titan charged right through the biggest group of spiders and started smashing his mace barbarically!

Each blow didn't just brutally blow up a spider, but tainted it with a green light that caused its exoskeleton to get petrified into stone!

The broken-off cursed limbs and other body parts were sent flying everywhere, spreading the curse to anything they touched!

This created great chaos amidst the army of spiders as all of them tried to attack and bite off Sergio, uncaring about the petrification curse. But Sergio knew what he was doing.

His armored body protected him from the spiders' bites, their long sharp fangs merely grazing against the stoned skin!

Yet, the spiders were absolutely relentless, jumping one after another like they were part of a suicide mission.

Although the petrification curse and Sergio's constant swinging were causing great damage, in the end, he found himself buried under a mountain of spiders.

This hindered his movement greatly, making it extremely difficult to swing his mace. Just when it looked like he would be buried to death, a piercing spiritual arrow appeared out of nowhere and penetrated the mountain of spiders!

Kaboom!

The following shockwave hurled all the spiders away, freeing Sergio at last. He glanced once in Jamal's direction and told him to keep them coming while he charged back to chaos!

"So strong..."

Arthur watched with a widened mouth at the duo's powerful synergy, having no idea how to react. They did nothing but repeat the process over and over again, yet, it was enough to keep an army of spiders busy.

"They won't be able to keep this for long."

On the other hand, Levi's expression was as grim as it could be. While he had no idea what was Sergio doing to keep the spiders occupied without dying, he knew it must be consuming an insane amount of solar energy.

Usually, this wouldn't be much of a problem since most Daywalkers packed a generous amount of Growth Totems to refuel their Shadowlife seeds when their stored solar energy was exhausted. However, they had just wasted all of them for nothing.

It was even worse for Jamal as his abilities were utilizing spiritual energy, which was a much more difficult source of energy to refuel.

In other words, it was just a matter of time before Sergio's armor collapsed and Jamal started firing blank arrows.

But, they were told to buy time for Shia, and they would do it even if they collapsed in the process.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Meanwhile, Shia and Nel'Vess weren't sitting idle. They were already trading blows tens of meters away from Levi.

Somehow, Shia was matching up amazingly against Nel'Vess even though she was still a Junior Daywalker.

'How strong, no wonder none of the ambushes worked.'

Nel'Vess raised an eyebrow as he blocked the crescent blade with his right arm. While he wasn't cut or even scratched, he could feel the potent force behind the swing.

'My normal attacks are doing nothing to him.' Shia narrowed her eyes, 'Blee'der, we have to use it.'

'Go for it, I have collected a decent amount of blood.' Blee'der smiled coldly.

The moment she received his approval, Shia bounced away from Nel'Vess and brought her crescent blade near her wrist. Then, she sliced the vein under Nel'Vess' startled look, causing a fountain of blood to spew everywhere.

Uncaring about everyone's stunned looks, Shia brought her wrist to her lips and started drinking her blood, causing her eyes to turn completely red and her heartbeats to accelerate beyond the human norm.

The moment her vision turned bright red with only Nel'Vess in sight, Shia wiped her lips with the right sleeve, smearing her cheek red.

Then, she dropped the weapon's shaft and held her crescent blade from a small handle in the center.

"I am about to get close and intimate." Shia showed a sinister grin as she uttered, "Mantra Blood Arts: Blood Frenzy."

Chapter 20 - Mantra Blood Arts: Blood Frenzy!

The instant the last word left her mouth, Shia appeared right next to Nel'Vess's left thigh, hunching akin to a blood demon. Then, she sliced the femoral artery, which was the main artery of the thigh.

This time, neither Nel'Vess reacted in time nor did his tough skin survive the slash.

Splash!

Blood sprayed akin to water coming out of a hose and Shia didn't waste a single drop of it as she swiftly placed herself in its direction, drinking it with a look of pure euphoria.

Smack!!

"You little demon!"

Nel'Vess kicked Shia away with a look of great disturbance and tightened his muscles, sealing the wound shut in an instant.

"Your blood tastes horrid." Shia commentated while wiping her mouth, "But, it will do the trick."

Not giving him any time to react, Shia pounced in his direction akin to a panther, always keeping her body and head low.

When Nel'Vess saw that she was aiming for his left thigh this time, he swiftly lifted his knee to block the attack. But, Shia switched her target at the last second, twisting her body in midair to strike his right waist, leaving behind a deep trench!

This time, she didn't stop her assault at all as the moment Nel'Vess placed his hand on the wound, she swung from below at the back of his elbow, cutting off another major artery.

Splash!

"You!!"

Nel'Vess got pissed and tried to predict her next movement by preemptively striking where she would land, alas, Shia was like a serpentine: boneless and beyond flexible.

His punch went past her face, missing her completely. When he tried to pull it back, Shia placed the sharp blade on its path, making him gush the bottom of his entire right arm!

Then, she opened her mouth below like a crazed freak, gulping down the blood nonstop. With each gulp, her crimson eyes blazed like she was recharging herself in the process.

'What the f*ck is this creep!'

Nel'Vess immediately tried to distance himself from Shia to heal his wounds and get a sense of what he was dealing with, but Shia refused to let him go.

"Who told you I am done?"

She chased after him with blood spilling from her lips and eyes gleaming red in the darkness, creating a harrowing scene for Arthur and the others.

"Ultimate innate ability, Blood frenzy...This is the second time I saw her use it." Jamal gulped a mouthful in dread, recalling some old memories.

"Will she be okay?" Arthur asked nervously.

"Okay? You should worry about the other. She won't stop until he either dies or she exhausts Blee'der's blood pool."

Jamal refocused on helping Sergio with his arrows, fully trusting that Shia wouldn't lose against Nel'Vess even if he was a Tier 3 nightcrawler.

He wasn't confident for no reason. He knew that Tier 3 nightcrawlers could range from insanely powerful to meh. All due to their evolutionary paths differing greatly from one to another.

For example, Nel'Vess could be a nightcrawler who lucked out and ate a natural treasure that helped him evolve remarkably and obtain powerful abilities; or a nightcrawler who ate something that was just enough to evolve him, limiting his strength and potential greatly.

In other words, just because a nightcrawler was higher-tiered, it didn't automatically give him a win...The same applied to Daywalkers.

In the case of Shia, while she might be still a Junior Daywalker, her true strength could rival that of a Pathfinder Daywalker, which was the next breakthrough. All due to her choosing remarkable evolution for her first breakthrough!

Right now, she was teaching a grave lesson to Nel'Vess for daring to target her as she made sure to not leave him even a moment of breather.

The moment he tried to defend a spot, she sliced another. Her speed, flexibility, and reaction speed were simply too much for him.

After a few moments of her demonic bombardment, Nel'Vess was left completely bloodied, spilling everywhere and tainting his fur red...Now, he truly looked like a devil.

'He is bleeding, but all of my cuts are external.' Shia narrowed her eyes coldly, 'I have yet to strike his vitals.'

'Just leave him be, he should bleed to dea...'

Before Blee'der could finish his sentence, Nel'Vess cracked his neck with an indifferent expression.

"I guess it's my fault for taking you lightly. I should have known Queen Dra'Webra wouldn't place a kill hit on a nobody."

Nel'Vess lifted his head until his bone-chilling gaze landed on Shia.

"But, fun times are over."

Immediately after, Nel'Vess' muscles started to inflate while his flesh wounds were healing at a noticeable speed simultaneously.

In less than a few seconds, his body was almost double the size with muscles so overpumped, they threatened to blow the veins on their own!

Nel'Vess breathed ruggedly, his nostrils letting out heated steam, seemingly having difficulty maintaining this form.

'Shit, the f*cker is an enhancement type Nightcrawler!' Blee'der shouted, 'Make a run for it, Shia!'

Blee'der could tell that Nel'Vess was already a strong entity after he suffered from so many attacks from Shia and still hadn't fallen.

Now that he knew Nel'Vess specialized in enhancement, he realized Shia stood no chance against him in his current empowered state.

Shia heard her partner but she didn't move an inch. She merely glanced behind at the Larson Brothers and then refocused on Nel'Vess, who was walking towards her.

'I am their guardian and I promised to get them back home safely.' Shia said coldly, 'They ain't dying under my watch.'

Not waiting until Nel'Vess made his move, Shia disappeared out of sight, sprinting in his direction while staying low.

This time, she threw her crescent blade at a great speed toward him while keeping a respectful distance.

Ting!

Alas, the crescent blade bounced off Nel'Vess's shoulder blade, making a clinging noise akin to hitting a solid metal.

The crescent blade curved back like a boomerang, and Shia caught it with a grim expression.

"Time to die."

Nel'Vess smiled once and then, he smashed his fist on the ground, sending out a powerful seismic shockwave!

Shia knew that her legs would be gone if she ate the shockwave directly, forcing her to jump away.

But the moment she did this, Nel'Vess was already lying in wait. He entered a kicking position and launched a giant rock in her direction at a blistering speed!

When Shia saw the size of the rock, she knew that it was nearly impossible to twist her body and evade it.

She lifted her arms and braced for impact, using her crystalized blood shield to protect her. Alas, the rock was just too much...

BOOOOOOOM!!

The crystallized blood shattered upon impact, slowing the rock's momentum for a bit, but it was not enough.

It smashed Shia's forearm bones to pieces and hurled her flying in the direction of Jamal, Levi, and Arthur.

"Come on Shia, we can't hold on much lon..."

Before Jamal could finish his sentence, his eyes captured the sight of a bloodied body rolling at great speed in front of them. After a few bounces, it stopped against a tree, lying motionless.

Arthur, Jamal, and even Levi turned their heads to gaze at the motionless body. Though Levi couldn't see her, her spiritual aura was so faint it felt like she could die at any moment.

"S...Shiaaa!!!"

Jamal stuttered for a moment and then shouted her name with a petrified expression. Seeing no response, his heart dropped to the bottom of his stomach.

"Follow me!"

He shouted at the Larson Brothers while he rushed in her direction. When he arrived, he reached out to his backpack and pulled out a wooden pink totem in the shape of a small bottle.

He smacked it on Arthur's chest while yelling at him to feed it to her. Then, he aimed his bow in the direction of Nel'Vess, who was seen knocking down trees with a single arm swing as he headed to finish the job.

"I...I..."

Arthur looked at the pink totem with parted lips, looking like he had no idea what to do with it.

Knowing that his brother never interacted with Recovery totems or was attentive enough to listen in his classes, Levi reached out with his hand randomly until he touched the totem in his brother's hand.

He swiftly snatched it and opened the bottle. Then, he ordered him sternly, "Open her mouth and help me pour it!"

Still shaken, Arthur did as he was told. As Levi was pouring a pink liquid into Shia's mouth, he was mumbling the incantation to activate it.

"By the golden rays of dawn's light, awaken now, restore and ignite. With the warmth of the sun and the strength of the day, heal all wounds and mend dismay..."

The moment he finished, the pink liquid illuminated brightly within Shia's body, making her muddled eyes gain some focus.

Although it hadn't healed her wounds yet, the pink liquid numbed the agonizing pain and focused on dealing with the grave internal injuries first.

The first thing she saw was Nel'Vess's shadow looming closer behind Levi and Arthur. She knew that Jamal wasn't going to stand up against him, not in his current exhausted state.

"G..o..to..Ser..gio." She whispered with great difficulty, coughing out blood in the process.

Through the noise of falling trees and Sergio's constant chaotic battle, no one would have heard her...But, Levi did.

His sensitive ears picked up on everything and he swiftly relayed the news to Jamal and Arthur.

Although the order sounded ludicrous and suicidal, Jamal knew that it wasn't time to question if Levi heard wrong or not.

On the other hand, Arthur didn't even waste a split second questioning his brother. He picked Levi and Shia in both arms and sprinted towards the army of spiders!

A mere mortal, a mere civilian, running to his damnation!

"Shockdart!!!"

Jamal cleared the path towards Sergio with a single arrow while chasing after Arthur. Still, a few spiders were on his way.

Arthur immediately placed Shia and Levi above his shoulders and charged through spiders with his head lowered and roaring at the top of his lungs!

He kneed some spiders, hurling them away, but a few others managed to sink their fangs deeply into his thighs, waist, and even his glutes.

AAAAAAAAAAAAA!!

All Arthur could do was continue roaring, his bloodshot eyes affixed on no one but Sergio, who was watching them with buckled knees.

He was already drop-dead tired, holding on through pure will and hope; hope that Shia was going to save their asses.

But, as he looked at her dangling from Arthur's shoulder, that hope was extinguished and was replaced with a despairing laugh.

'We are f*cked, aren't we O'thnir?'