

Solar Ascension

#Chapter 53: Assigned Teams [3]: A Vision - Read Solar Ascension Chapter 53: Assigned Teams [3]: A Vision

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"Now that I think about it," Nox muttered with a chuckle, "these things only look scary when they're climbing down, right?"

He turned, only to realize that he was completely alone, "ah that's right, they all died."

He then turned to the Eclipsed scrambling to go up the tree before pulling out a dagger from his inventory and tossing it at the creature.

The Eclipsed let out a screech as the SE powered dagger burned into it and burning it from within.

The creature, a tier 1 Eclipsed, didn't even get the chance to struggle that much before its life was easily snuffed out.

"Alright then," Nox muttered as he called back the dagger and sent it into his inventory, "time to go home."

Compared to how he looked when he first entered this dread place, he was now... completely unrecognizable.

His black jacket had been discarded a while back, leaving him with only the black shirt he had underneath, and even that was ripped in multiple places.

His messy hair was even more so and the only things that remained intact were his pants and the boots which were the reason he was alive....the boots, not the pants.

Under his eyes were bags, which indicated the fact that he hadn't slept for days now, but that was the least of his worries, after all, he wanted to get out of this dreaded place, but he didn't know how.

"I'm back," he announced the moment he reached his makeshift home, which was just a cave with rations and edible plants that Lorene's book had indicated.

Though most of them were disgusting, he had no choice but to eat them since his rations were quickly running out.

Fun fact, did you know that some Eclipsed were edible? You just had to overcome their weird taste and you'd have an endless supply of meat.

Finding out which ones were edible was the hard part, hunting and eating them was easy.

He still shuddered at the memory of him trying to find out which Eclipsed was safe to eat.

Though, most humans would die or have their SE corrupted if they tired eating an Eclipsed but his SE made sure to purify every bit of corruption within it.

"No I didn't find a way out again today," Nox suddenly spoke up, to no one in particular, "but I'll have to try again tomorrow."

Yeah, staying alone in a rift for close to a month now wasn't doing any good to his mentality, especially when he had to try and not die from the occasional tier 3s he encountered.

"Well, it's not like I can actually tell what day it is," He spoke again, "since the night's neverending."

He then opened his inventory to a side of the cave with blood and emptied the corpses of Eclipsed he had hunted and walked to another corner of the cave.

"It's been a month now since that happened, hasn't it," he muttered as he crossed out four marks on the wall, making it six crossed out marks.

Now you might be wondering how he got to in this situation and what happened to his teammates.

Well...

[A Month Back]

"We're assigned a tier 2 rift?" Loreenne asked with a small frown, on her face, "isn't that too dangerous for students who are just first years?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Elias assured with a smile, "besides, as the headmistress said, there're safety measurements in place."

Though still a bit doubtful, she just nodded and didn't ask anymore questions, she was sure the academy would interfere the moment things went too far...

Levi and Nox, on the other hand, said nothing. Nox, because he had nothing to say, and Levi...well, maybe because he couldn't speak?

They hadn't heard him speak yet, even when he introduced himself, he just pointed to his name on the list and went silent.

"Deployment will begin shortly," a mechanical voice from their watches announced.
"Team 47, report to Gate C-12."

"That's us," Elias said. "Come on."

The trio followed him as they walked where the map led them. They just realized that had the other students had stepped back looking at something before them.

They made their way through the crowd and immediately saw what was being admired. It was like a tear in space, that was releasing cold air from within.

Most, or all of them were the size of a door and according to professor Sirius' teachings, this was a small rift, probably tier 1-2.

The assigned groups moved to the rifts with the tags above them, each hesitating for a second before passing the instructors that were standing by them and walking in.

Nox and his team approached the rift that was marked C-12 and stopped just at the entrance.

Now that they were close enough, Nox could feel the dreadful aura this place released. It was as if his very being was rejecting this place, but he quickly suppressed that feeling.

"Alright," Elias suddenly spoke up, "the moment we're in, I want everyone to form a diamond formation with Lorenné in the center, we'll start planning when we have find a safe spot."

His team nodded as they prepared to enter the rift with him.

Just outside the hall, Headmistress Aurielle was in an elevator headed to the office when she suddenly froze.

The lights flickered for a second and everything went dark before a glow could be seen from behind her blindfold.

She slowly pulled it off and the darkness around her suddenly changed into a dark forest blanketed by a dark night with no moon or stars.

When she looked around, all she saw was dead bodies of kids that wore the academy uniform, but not a single Eclipsed was around.

She slowly raised her head to see Nox said there, though he was bleeding he still stood straight and on the sword in his hand, a lot more blood was dripping.

The shadows suddenly took the vague shape of a man with horns, a lantern in hand and a white bone like mask, as it looked directly at her and said, "do you like my first gift?"

With his words, Aurielle was snapped back to reality as blood started dripping from her nose which she quickly wiped off.

She suddenly tapped on the panel in the elevator, immediately connecting him to Garron Boar and without a greeting she said, "don't let the kids enter Gate C-12."

Radiant Boar was confused for a few seconds before saying, "but head mistress, they're already in the gate."

At his words, something like a rip was heard in the background, forcing Garron Boar's eyes to widen.

"It has already started," Aurielle muttered with a resigned sigh, there was nothing she could do now.

"H-head mistress..." He started but was cut off.

"I know," She answered, "the rift has gotten much bigger."

Chapter 54: The Rift [1]: Nightlings

As Elias had said, the moment they stepped into the rift, they took the closest to a diamond formation, they could, with Lorene tucked between them.

The air had immediately changed the moment they stepped into the rift and they immediately started feeling light headed.

"This is normal," Lorene informed, "just allow your SE to flow freely, you should be back to normal in a few seconds."

Following her instructions, the trio allowed their solar energy to move freely within them as their lungs slowly adjusted to the air and they finally had the chance to look at where they were.

The first thing they noticed was trees, lots and lots of trees.

There were trees as far as the eye could see....well, as far as the darkness allowed them to.

The next thing they noticed was that the sky blanketing them was dark.

Not dark like nightfall or anything like that, it just seemed like some type of black miasma hanging over them.

There were no stars or any source of light as far as they could see.

The moment they stepped in, Nox immediately started feeling the same sense of dread he had been from Ayla, but this one was different.

This one felt like whatever it was, it really was trying to kill him unlike Ayla, but he just chuckled it to the fact that it was because this was his first time in a rift.

"Be on guard," Elias warned, "we don't know what might jump out from the darkness."

Well, they didn't have to wait long to find out because soon enough, a shadow detached itself from one of the trees and pounced, aiming for Loreenne, the one it identified as the weakest.

Unfortunately for it, seconds before it could reach her, a golden line appeared on it and the next second, it exploded into flames.

"Thanks," Loreenne muttered, turning to Levi, whose dagger was now in his hand.

Levi just nodded before focusing back on listening to their surroundings.

"Light," Elias suddenly muttered.

"No wait," Loreenne tried stopping him, but it was already too late as he had tossed something in the air, and the next second, a blinding light washed over them, illuminating the entire forest.

"The hell," Nox muttered as looked at what was surrounding them. He immediately took Morphos out of his inventory and transformed it into a sword.

Turns out, the Eclipsed that jumped at them wasn't alone, as the others had been waiting for the right moment to attack, only to be startled by the sudden burst of light.

It only took them a moment to shake off the sudden interruption.

And they all lunged at the quartet at the same time. The approaching Eclipsed were small, but their numbers more than made up for their sizes.

If Nox could count them, they'd number over a hundred or maybe even more.

"Hold on," Elias said as he pushed a button on one of his solar techs and a golden dome enveloped them, causing the Eclipsed to crash into it.

Nox finally had a good look at them, and ugly wasn't even the right word to describe them, though their looks was bad news in more ways than one.

They were as small as house cats, but they had four elongated arms, almost similar to a spider's.

The creatures also seem to be quadrupeds but he wouldn't be surprised if they were also capable of walking on just two of their limbs.

As was born for all Eclipsed, the body of these were made of complete darkness, even with the light source hanging directly above them.

At this range, Nox could see that their skin seemed to be moving, kinda like some type of goo, but at the same time, not.

The scanner on their watches told them that these things were tier ones, but based on their looks and the fact that they had seen one of them basically detach itself from the shadows, they were capable of using umbra energy.

Which placed them at tier 2, so they had to deal with them as such.

The creatures endlessly crashed into the barrier in futile attempts to get to their preys hiding within.

"Lorenne?" Elias turned to her and she immediately understood what he wanted.

"Those are Nightlings," Lorenne said quickly, flipping through her massive book until she found the matching sketch. "They're... um... supposed to be rare."

"Of course they are," Nox muttered.

"They're classified as Tier 1," she continued, "but that's misleading. Their bodies are technically Tier 1, but their use of umbra energy bumps them straight into Tier 2 territory. They manipulate ambient umbra to hide, stick to surfaces, and overwhelm prey in swarms."

"Fantastic," Elias muttered. "Weaknesses?"

"They're weak to Solar energy or even any SE powered weapons," she lifted her head to them, "so basically any solar tech."

"I see," Elias nodded before turning to Nox and Levi.... Who had disappeared again, they turned to see him out of the barrier and on the branch of one of the trees, quietly picking off the Eclipsed.

With a sigh, Elias turned to Nox and said, "can I leave taking care of them to you two? I'll stay here and make sure nothing happens to our encyclopedia."

Nox nodded before activating his boots and disappearing from within the barrier, reappearing on another one of the branches of the trees.

With Morphos in hand, he disappeared again and the next time he reappeared, multiple Nightlings froze before going up in flames.

Training with Astra, as torturous as it was, was paying off. You see, the boots had two modes, one of which he had no idea of.

Well, rather than having no idea of its existence, it was more like he had no idea how to access it, always preferring to go with the mode that came instinctively.

As much as they allowed him to teleport, they also allowed him to run just as fast and he could switch between either depending on what he needed.

Right now, he was using the speed mode, hence the reason the Eclipsed hadn't seen him coming until it was too late.

"Let's clear up these pests shall we," he muttered as time seemed to slow down and he disappeared the next second.

Chapter 55: The Rift [2]: A Cave

It had taken a while, but Nox and Levi completely got rid of all the Nightlings.

Luckily, no other Eclipsed had been drawn in by the residual SE in the air... which might've been a good thing, or a very bad thing, depending on the reason why.

But that didn't mean they didn't have to move, since they didn't know whether or not the Eclipsed would suddenly change their minds and start approaching.

"Let's find a place to set camp," Elias said as he and Loreenne walked towards the duo.

Loreenne clutched her book closer. "Preferably somewhere with walls. Many, many walls."

"Yeah," Nox muttered, scanning the dark forest, "somewhere where we can only expect attacks for a single spot."

Levi landed silently beside them, his feet barely making a sound. He pointed toward the east, into a thicker part of the forest.

"You saw something?" Elias asked.

He gave a small nod and immediately started walking towards that direction.

With Levi leading, they moved through the trees cautiously. The deeper they went, the more oppressive the air felt.

The feeling of dread Nox felt only got worse as the farther in they walked, but it wasn't like he could turn back now.

After all, the way a rift worked was simple, once solar knights walked in, the exit would disappear and only reappear when the 'boss' was defeated.

Though, solar knights from outside could still access it, they'd also be stuck within until the rift was 'cleared'.

The quartet continued forward and soon enough, they spotted something.

Just up ahead, partially hidden by massive roots and vine-like shadows, was a large crack in the side of a rocky cliff.

It was a cave big enough for four people, completely sheltered, and with only one entrance.

The perfect spot, if only there wasn't something else inside already.

"I'll scout ahead," Elias said, "Nox and Levi, make sure nothing sneaks up on us."

"Alright," Nox muttered while Levi just nodded.

Elias then proceeded to take out a drone from within his inventory, and with it came a controller with a screen on it.

He requested for Lorene to lay out her palm and he placed the drone on it before activating it and it gently took off.

The screen also turned on, reflecting everything that the camera on the drone could see.

Nox watched in awe, the drones he always fixed back in the slums were obviously a lot inferior to this.

He imagined how much credits this would've earned him if he was back in the slums before shaking his head, he was not in the slums anymore.

Besides, thanks to the scavenged solar tech during the entrance test, he had more than enough credits to not worry about it for a while.

With that, he went back to keeping guard and he turned to Levi who had disappeared...again.

Nox's golden pupils took on a glow and he soon spotted Levi.

It seemed he was a lot more comfortable invisible as he sat on a tree, making sure to take down the occasional Nightlings that passed close to him.

Meanwhile with Elias and Loreenne, they watched the drone slowly approach the cave and enter it.

The light from the drone illuminated the cave's interior. Contrary to its position, the ground was surprisingly flat.

The stalactites hung high enough from the ground to allow them to stand upright without worrying about hitting their heads.

Not that Nox had to worry about that....

The cave walls had markings but it was mostly due to weathering than from an Eclipsed.

The drone soon reached the end of the cave without encountering anything strange or any indication of an Eclipsed so Elias announced,

"It's clear," he said turning to the duo that were on lookout duty.

Fzzzz!

The Eclipsed stuck on Nox's sword let out a sizzling sound as it went up in flames. Levi hopped down the tree again before they started walking towards the cave.

They still hadn't let down their guards, Levi especially so, as his eyes continued scanning around.

They soon reached the bottom of the rocky cliff and looked up, before Loreenne asked, "right, how're we getting up there?"

"Well..." Elias placed a hand on his chin before looking at both Nox and Levi, "you guys have solar techs that allows you to teleport right?"

They nodded before he asked again, "can you get us up there?"

Levi looked up before he extended his hand towards Elias who calmly took it and a second later, they disappeared without making a single sound.

"I guess it's just you and me," Nox said before extending his hand to Loreenne.

She looked a bit hesitant before sighing and taking his hand, the moment she did, the world slowed down as a golden glow covered the two.

The next second they were gone.

Loreenne slowly opened her eyes, only to realize that she was now on a ground made of rocks.

One moment they were at the bottom and the next, they were now standing in the cave.

"This should be fine," Elias muttered, "it's too high for just any Eclipsed to climb and there's only one spot we can expect attacks from."

He was right, the less entrances the better, since they wouldn't have to worry about being ambushed.

Elias took out a couple of items from his inventory causing Nox's eyes to widen.

"How'd you fit all that in there?" He couldn't help but ask.

After all, Elias had taken out a couple of solar tech, something that looked like lights, and a bed..... No, BEDS!

"Well," he turned to Nox with a smile on his face, "I hacked the inventory giving myself a lot more space than provided."

"Is that allowed?" Loreenne asked.

"As long as they don't find out," he muttered with a smile, "I could do the same for you guys, but I didn't bring any of my hacking equipments."

Nox looked down at his own watch thinking about how useful it'd be to have more space.

That meant he could hoard as much solar tech as he wanted.

"Alright," Elias clapped both hands together, "let's get some rest, we'll start figuring out how big this rift is and the boss's location, tomorrow."

Chapter 56: The Rift [3]: Dark Cyclops

Nox physically recoiled as he listened to Lorene's words, he wished he could just wipe that info completely from his mind.

"That's why I said it's only used as a last resort," She explained looking at his reaction, "besides, they're completely purified else any human will die from the first bit alone."

"Yes, but," Nox lifted the Eclipsed with his dagger without getting close to it, "people eat these?"

Sure, the food in the slums wasn't gourmet, hell, they even sometimes tasted like someone had chewed it up and sold it anyway, but even then, they never resorted to eating an Eclipsed.

He had seen those things up close and they did not look appetizing in the least bit.

Elias just chuckled before saying, "my father has actually eaten one before, while stuck in a rift."

Nox slowly turned his head toward him with the most bewildered expression his face could afford to make.

"D-don't make that expression," Elias said as he looked at Nox's face, "he actually survived thanks to that."

"Although just barely," he admitted. "He said it tasted like burnt rubber dipped in despair, though he was delirious when he said it, so maybe that affected the review."

Levi walked in silence behind the trio, taking down the occasional Eclipsed that came their way, alongside Nox.

They had left the cave after a good night's rest only to realize, this place only had night.

The quartet were sure they had slept for over eight hours, with each taking turns to lookout and yet, the darkness never seem to fade.

Well, that much was to be expected, after all, this place was the Eclipsed realm, it'd be weird for the sun to suddenly rise.

Elias hadn't brought a terrain scanner, so the team had to leave the cave to find out exactly how massive this place was and where the 'boss' Eclipsed was located.

Tier 1 rifts were usually a small isolated portion of the Eclipsed realm which meant this forest was its entire biome and the boss Eclipsed should be in the deeper parts.

After a while of walking, Nox suddenly stopped, causing the other three to turn to him.

"Is it just me," he muttered with a frown on his face, "or does it feel like something wants us to keep walking forward?"

"What do you mean?" Loreenne asked but instead of Nox, Elias was the one who answered.

"He's right," he said, "by now, the Eclipsed we're encountering should be a lot stronger but we're only encountering Nightlings, which is strange."

Even Levi nodded in agreement as he had also noticed the strangeness.

Tier 1 and 2 Eclipsed were usually instincts guided rather than intelligence, which meant whatever was laying a trap for them was above those tiers.

"Should we turn back?" Loreenne asked, looking at Elias, since he was the group leader.

Elias thought on it for a while before reasoning, "Turning back now changes nothing. If whatever Eclipsed is doing this is intelligent enough to herd us, then it already knows where we are. Whether we walk forward or backward, we're still inside its territory."

Loreenne swallowed. "So... what do we do?"

"We stay alert," Elias said firmly. "And we don't split up. Whatever's watching us clearly wants something. Until we figure out what, we stick to the plan, move toward the deeper region and locate the boss."

The team nodded and as suggested, they continued forward.

They walked on for a while, when suddenly, the ground started rumbling. It felt like some kind of stampede but instead of just rumbling, this one actually shook the earth.

"Get ready," Elias ordered and Nox immediately switched Morphos from daggers to a sword, since that felt more comfortable in his hands.

The sound got close and the trees suddenly started groaning as they made way for whatever was coming.

"W-what the hell is that?" Loreenne let out as the Eclipsed revealed itself, momentarily forgetting that she was supposed to be their encyclopedia.

But one couldn't blame her, after all, the Eclipsed was one they had never seen before.

The creature easily stood at five meters, its body seemingly blending with the darkness around.

It seemed to have a single horn on its head, and just below it was a single massive red eye.

In the creature's hand was a massive club and without waiting for the team of four to fully take in its appearance, it slammed the club towards them.

Luckily, Nox and Levi quickly activated their teleportation solar tech and retreated with the other two to safety.

BOOM!

The sound was deafening as the club made contact with the forest floor, leaving a massive crater in its shape.

What was it they were saying about encountering stronger Eclipsed? Well, they just did and their watches immediately confirmed.

The Eclipsed was a tier 3, luckily, it was just a normal tier 3 without the ability to use Umbra energy.

Well, that didn't mean that this was going to be any easier.

"I don't think my barriers can block its attacks," Elias said before turning to Loreenne.

"T-that's a Dark Cyclops," Loreenne finally forced out, her voice trembling as she flipped through pages so fast they nearly tore. "A Tier 3 humanoid type. They're... they're known for overwhelming strength and high resilience. Their single eye lets them track Solar signatures directly."

"Meaning?" Nox asked, eyes locked on the towering Eclipsed as it slowly straightened its posture, club dragging trenches in the soil.

"Meaning it can see your Solar energy through the darkness even when you're not actively using it," she whispered.

"Perfect," Nox muttered dryly.

They would've had Levi try and sneak up on it, but if the creature was capable of seeing your SE, then that meant that plan wouldn't work.

The Eclipsed scanned the forest floor for the pests before he spotted three glowing flames, two of which were small and the other was in the shape of a human.

The Cyclops then moved with speeds that didn't match its size as it raised its club above the team again and let it descend.

"Fuck."