

## Descent 1351

Chapter 1351 Be Good.

Leonel and Aina rose from the ground. Surprisingly, the both of them didn't seem to care much about the precarious situation they had been in. Aina simply picked up her enormous ax as though nothing had happened.

"Yip! Yip!"

Little Blackstar dove into Aina's chest, causing her to smile. It seemed that little guy was even more excited than she was. But, of course he was, he had finally gotten his favorite bed back.

The three youths frowned. They were suddenly acutely aware that Leonel and Aina weren't injured in the slightest. Leonel's bruises and lumps had already healed along with his cracked ribs. Aside from a small bit of dried blood that touched his body here and there, there was nothing else. As for Aina, she was even less injured, having been stowed away for their only major fight, a bone she had yet to finish picking with Leonel.

Leonel looked over the three youths. In truth, he had no intention of taking on burdens and it would be more difficult to avoid detection if he took three people with him. But, he also wouldn't feel right if he simply allowed three people he could have helped die.

"We're close to the exit." Leonel said with a smile, and that was all he said.

He had realized already that the method he and Aina had been taking was correct. They Runed Rapax hadn't been luring them incorrectly, but it was rather a problem of the fact a Rapax would obviously be more familiar with their Nest than Leonel could possibly be. So, when the Runed Rapax realized what they must want to do, cutting them off before they could reach their goal was child's play.

Luckily, this meant that they were still near the entrance, or rather exit, nonetheless. However, whether it was safe passage to take or not was a different matter entirely.

Leonel turned and began to walk away with Aina by his side.

The trio looked at one another, frowning. They weren't sure if Leonel's words were true, they had only come to this place because they were running away, they hadn't been paying attention to where they were going.

The lack of injuries on the pair and their nonchalance seemed to scream that they were powerful. But... Was it really possible to leave this Nest without so much as an injury? They were all absolute geniuses in their own right, they didn't believe that the gap between them and someone else could possibly be so wide. So, could it just be that they had gotten lucky and didn't come across any enemies?

"Forget it, it doesn't matter. We have no idea where we're going anyway and would have to just randomly pick a direction. We might as well see if they're right about the exit." One of them spoke.

Leonel didn't look back when he felt them being followed. He had already done his part. Whether they chose to follow him or not had nothing to do with him any longer at that point.

As Leonel had expected, after splitting down just one more tunnel, the wind shifted and the air became slightly cleaner. After traveling several hundred more meters, Leonel came to the edge of a corner and came to a grinding halt.

Aina stopped right behind him and Little Blackstar grew quiet. Following their lead, the three also came to a pause.

Leonel closed his eyes, his brows furrowing.

There was nothing there. No guards, no sentries, nothing. He couldn't sense any Force Arts, no traps, and even the flow of Force didn't have anything wrong with it. There wasn't even something as simple as a door, it was just opened wide to the expanse of what Leonel assumed was the Void Battlefield.

'No, there's something odd there.'

Leonel's brows shot up and he suddenly understood.

This path sloped upward, going from deep underground to above it and forming the hole of an exit/entrance. However, on the opposite side...

There was actually another entrance.

It wasn't just that, there were entrances surrounding this one entirely. And, beyond that, there were enormous domes riddled with holes that Leonel was fairly certain were likely the very same holes they had been looking up through earlier. There was definitely a 300 meter drop on the other side of them.

'Shit.'

Leonel's gaze narrowed.

This wasn't just a Rapax Nest. It was a field of Rapax Nests. If they wanted to get out of here, they would need to somehow navigate through them all until they could find a nest on the edge to escape.

Leonel was suddenly annoyed by his dad. The old man couldn't have said a single word about this? He could have at least pointed out a direction.

But, as things stood now, Leonel was truly uncertain of which way to go. Even though he had noticed that his senses had actually greatly improved, it still wasn't enough to cover an entire network of Nests, especially when just one was so large already.

On top of that, for the same reasons as before, traveling above ground definitely wasn't an option, at least not long term. It was fine if this exit didn't have guards because each Nest essentially fed into one another. However, Leonel was still certain that there were many keeping an eye on the above ground holes or else the Rapax would be far too easy to infiltrate.

'We have to take a risk. We can't just blindly choose a direction and hope for the best. I need to fly high enough into the sky to see which way is the shortest to safety. So long as I can lock onto that direction, even while stuck beneath the ground, I'll be able to stay true to it. But, I need the direction first...'

Leonel took a deep breath, his gaze steeling. Then, he took a long stride forward.

But, just before he could do as he planned, he suddenly felt a strong force grab onto his wrist and yank him backward.

"Uh..."

Leonel looked back to find a glaring Aina.

"No you don't. You're going to be a good boyfriend and tell me exactly what you're planning. Then we'll see if I should get involved or not."

Leonel's lip twitched.

The three youths to their backs looked toward one another, not sure of how to react.

Chapter 1352 Trust

Leonel sighed.

"Alright. The exit is around the corner but there's nothing guarding it."

"And?" Aina asked.

She was smart enough to know that this was definitely not a good thing. Different species aside, the Rapax were clearly intelligent. They wouldn't make such a rudimentary mistake.

"There's nothing guarding it because they don't need to guard it, at least not this exit in particular. We're currently surrounded by three other identical entrances that lead to other hives identical to this one. In fact, we're in a field of nests right now and my Internal Sight doesn't spread far enough to tell if we're nearer the middle, an edge, or what direction we should go in."

The expressions of the three youths sunk when they heard this. They had thought that they were close to at least leaping over this first hurdle, but there was actually so much more to go? Who had set up this Selection? Did they want them all to die?!

"So you want to fly up and check which direction to go." Aina finished.

"There's no real other choice."

"Of course there's another choice. You could make an image probe to check for you. If that doesn't work, there's Blackstar. His stealth is much higher than any of our own. He could probably do it without risking being found out at all."

"An image probe would require materials and a Force Art that wouldn't be eroded by Anarchic Force, neither of which I have on hands right now. As for Blackstar, that is a more legitimate possibility, but I don't like it."

"So it comes down to you being stubborn again."

"It isn't stubbornness, just efficiency. There's no amount of stealth that will help Little Blackstar hide himself in the air."

"It's just relativity. Blackstar is far smaller than any one of us and also has the best evasive maneuvers. At the same time, the Rapax likely know that there's a bunch of humans running around in their territory

by now, they might not be ready to spot a little mink. And, on top of that, can't Little Blackstar change form as well? If it comes down to it, it might be worth exploring the possibility of using that to our advantage."

"I just think it's still better if I go."

"You aren't explaining."

"It's hard to explain."

"It isn't. I know why you want to go. For one, you don't want to put Blackstar in danger. And, secondly, you trust in your ability to react to unforeseen circumstances far more than anyone else, you're just reluctant to say so because it proves my point."

Leonel opened his mouth to respond but suddenly found that he had nothing to say.

Little Blackstar's head bobbed back and forth between them as the two 'argued', if it could even be called that. He seemed very curious about how this would end and even seemed amused about how Aina had cornered Leonel.

Whenever Leonel made an assessment, there were two things he always took into consideration. The first was what the situation was at face value, and the second was what the situation had a chance of mutating and warping into.

The first was straight forward enough, however the more likely the second was to cause his analysis to veer off path, the more likely it was that he would rather take on the burden himself.

In Leonel's opinion, there was simply no one who could adapt to a change faster than he could. In fact, one of the only people to ever impress him with their adaptation ability—Emna Beiceran from Crimson Hall—was a woman he almost immediately invited to become one of his generals. To this day, she had still been the only person he had ever tried to recruit like that. Sometimes he still lamented that he didn't manage to win her over.

These were the two forces tugging at Leonel's mind. And, the truth was that even if Emna was here, he would still trust himself hundreds of times more. That was just how he was.

He liked to cut out variables as much as possible, even way back to the final game he and James had played together...

Thinking to this point, Leonel closed his eyes and took a breath. When he opened them again, he rubbed his thumb on Blackstar's small little head.

"Ready, little guy?"

"Yip! Yip!"

Blackstar excitedly bounded into the air, flipping and vanishing into the fog before appearing around the corner.

Aina smiled, but inwardly her heart was beating wildly. She felt that this was the right decision, but if things went poorly, it would become even more difficult for Leonel to make this choice again in the future.

In a lot of ways, Leonel was right. He was able to adapt faster and better than most. The reason he was so confident that he could defeat people as strong as Aina despite being weaker was because raw strength wasn't his greatest asset, his mind was.

Leonel had had no business defeating Sixth Dimensional experts as a mere Tier 1 existence, and yet he had done so. That kind of confidence, that kind of bone deep and unflappable poise in the face of terrible odds was all too rare.

However, Aina also knew that if Leonel didn't learn how to trust that others could accomplish good as well, even if they weren't as great as him, his dreams wouldn't be able to progress very far. There was only so much a single person could accomplish.

Aina looked toward Leonel's side profile, but he was already extremely focused. His gaze had frosted over, his expression had become unreadable, and an oppressive aura began to weigh down on the surroundings, suddenly making it difficult for the three youths behind them to breathe.

Little Blackstar shot out of the exit like a beam of black light then performed a sharp 90 degree turn upward, flying into the skies.

Leonel could feel his partner's excitement through their connection.

#### Chapter 1353 Shadow World

Little Blackstar's speed was extraordinary. With the inherent darkness of the Void Battlefield and the black fog that hung over everything, Aina had indeed been correct about the little mink's stealth ability.

However, there was another reason that Leonel had chosen to go with Aina's suggestions, and that was because of the problem of visibility.

While it seemed like a good idea to get higher ground and see further, there was one important matter that had to be considered, and that was the fog. Even back on Void Palace grounds, Leonel could hardly see a few meters ahead of himself, and this was fairly similar for everyone else as well. Leonel wasn't convinced that the Void Battlefield would be much better. In fact, it was likely that it would be even worse.

Leonel had planned to circumvent this potential issue using an Internal Sight manipulation technique. By changing the form of his Internal Sight, he could gain more range in a straight line simply by rearranging how he allocated its volume. With the sudden increase to his mind's strength, Leonel had been confident that he could do this.

Of course, this came with a great risk. Internal Sight was just another form of manipulating Force and it could be sensed by those sensitive to it, especially those of higher Dimensions. It was possible that Rapax would be less sharp about such things considering their immunity, but it was also just as likely that they'd be hyper sensitive as seen by the first Rapax Leonel had fought after coming to this Nest. That particular Rapax, due to Leonel's loose use of his Internal Sight, had already sensed him before he even rounded the corner.

It was because of this that Leonel wasn't confident in avoiding detection using the fog, which was why he wanted to be the one to personally take on the burden.

This aside, Little Blackstar didn't have such an ability. He hadn't learned the technique Leonel had nor did he have great use of Internal Sight. It was odd, but Leonel couldn't remember Little Blackstar ever using Internal Sight at all.

However, what Little Blackstar could do was something else.

The little mink was a Shadow Sovereign and had access to the Shadow World. The Shadow World was considered to be a mirror of their current world, one where Shadows reigned supreme.

Whenever it was that Little Blackstar became immune to outside attacks, it was because the little one had shifted his physical state into his Shadow World. And, whenever Little Blackstar 'teleported', what was actually happening was him shifting to his Shadow World then popping back out.

It had taken Leonel a very long time to construct the ins and outs of this ability because Little Blackstar couldn't communicate via conventional means, but he believed that he had some understanding of it now.

Without getting overly lost in the details, Leonel had commanded Little Blackstar to shoot into the air as high as he could. Once he was in position, he would shift into his Shadow World.

While within his Shadow World, Little Blackstar was essentially on a very short timer. Although being within the Shadow World gave Little Blackstar a great amount of control, it was also a great burden on the little guy. This was why Little Blackstar never blinked away for too long.

The little mink had three states. One where he was fully within the Real World. A second where his image was in the Real World and his physical form was in the Shadow World. And the third was one where his entire being was in the Shadow World.

Staying in the first and second state were relatively easier. However, to take full advantage of the Shadow World, Little Blackstar needed to enter the third state.

The Shadow World was shared by Shadow Sovereigns. As they moved about in the Real World, so too would they shift within the Shadow World. Whenever a Shadow Sovereign entered battle, that location of the Shadow World they were in, the mirror image of their location in the Real World, would effectively become their Domain.

Within this Domain, the Shadow Sovereign would gain control over all sorts of abilities. But, what Little Blackstar used the most often was folding space. This was why the little mink could move so fast. By shifting into the Shadow World, Blackstar could fold reality to his whims and teleport. This even allowed him to do what Aina couldn't and leave and enter the Segmented Cube at will.

However, this wasn't what Leonel wanted Little Blackstar to do this time.

By having control over a Domain you would, by proxy, know every single little detail about that Domain. Knowing this, Leonel's goal was obvious.

He wanted Little Blackstar to enter the Shadow World and push the bounds of his Domain as far as possible. In doing so, the Little Mink would gain a perfect understanding of everything within his Domain in the blink of an eye, albeit for just a very small moment.

This leads to an obvious question: why risk Little Blackstar like this, then? Couldn't this same thing be accomplished within the tunnels?

And the unfortunate truth was no. Little Blackstar had a hard enough time expanding his Domain in the Shadow World already without having to worry about thick barriers of wall infused and tempered with Anarchic Force over countless generations. Simply put, Blackstar's attempts would end up being stalled before he even got the chance.

Leonel didn't want Little Blackstar to waste time trying to map out the tunnels. Instead, he wanted a perfect aerial view of the network of hives. After that, everything else could be left up to him.

Little Blackstar reached his apex height, his little body suddenly vanishing into a blackness.

Almost instantaneously, several powerful auras swept over, sensing something amiss. However, they just barely missed Little Blackstar entirely, ending up snagging their senses at empty air.

Within the Shadow World, a perfect replica of their world reflected in Little Blackstar's eyes, but the range was too small to see everything. However, the good news was that in his Domain, even the fog couldn't obstruct Little Blackstar's vision any longer.

The little guy had never tried to push the barriers before, but this time, he would go all out.

Little Blackstar's long whiskers twitched, his hair standing on end and his body seeming to expand by twice its original size.

BANG!

Little Blackstar's Domain grew explosively.

"Yip!"

A violent shudder suddenly shook the little mink's body, a ripple of pain coursing through his mind.

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Within the tunnels, Leonel's frosty gaze dropped several more levels of temperature.

'There's a second Shadow Sovereign in this place.'

Chapter 1354 Smoldering

Leonel wasn't infuriated because there was a second Shadow Sovereign. From the very beginning, he had been aware that there was more than one. In fact, he knew a second one in Mordred.

When he first learned about Shadow Sovereigns from Uncle Montez, he had introduced it in a way that Leonel knew from then that there would always be more than one.

Without a doubt, the true reason Leonel was pissed was because Little Blackstar had been hurt. It wasn't a devastating injury, but it was definitely one the little mink would need some time to recover from.

Leonel had always treated Little Blackstar like a little brother, a child that was still growing up. This was why he rarely if ever used Little Blackstar in battle even if the little one was a powerful warrior. Leonel had no doubt that compared to these geniuses of the Void Palace, Little Blackstar was no worse. However, he was still reluctant to truly let him loose.

And now, his little brother had been harmed. How could he not be infuriated?

The Shadow World was shared by Shadow Sovereigns. Under most situations, this wasn't a problem as they were rare beings to begin with. However, in the case that two Shadow Sovereigns did meet on the same battlefield, Leonel hadn't known exactly what would happen... until now.

The clash of Domains had caused a strong backlash and harmed Little Blackstar. In fact, Leonel could feel the malicious intent that converged on the tail end of the interaction.

Little Blackstar had tried to envelop the network of hives with his Domain from above. But, this being the first time the little one had tried to do such a thing, he hadn't been prepared for the possibility of running into another Domain.

"Yip!"

Little Blackstar fell from the skies.

Leonel had already moved, rounding the corner and catching Little Blackstar from the air. His expression was as dark as could be.

Little Blackstar's small eyes were tightly closed, a hint of blood trickling from his nose. He trembled as though he had just been plunged into freezing waters.

Leonel cradled the little mink in his arms, his Snow Force reaching out and caressing him from head to toe. It was only after this that Blackstar showed the slightest hints of relief, however the smoldering fury in Leonel's gaze only seemed to grow hotter.

In those moments, had Little Blackstar not retreated beneath his command fast enough, the result could have been devastating. A Shadow World was tied to something intrinsic within a Shadow Sovereign, and the loss of it was equivalent to the loss of a life. He had been that close to losing his partner of so many years.

"... Leonel?"

Aina's voice came from his side.

To her, this was the worst case scenario. Even though she knew that this was the best course of action to take and that her logic had been sound, it was simply human nature to feel terrible. If she hadn't said anything, this wouldn't have happened. But, then again, the person to suffer would have likely been Leonel instead.

"It's not your fault." Leonel said softly. "It's mine. I've sheltered him too much. He has no idea how to deal with situations where the enemy isn't a ridiculous amount weaker than him."



Aina's gaze flickered. Leonel's words were sound, but they had a biting cold to them that he couldn't seem to retrieve just yet. Despite the fact they were standing out in the open of the Void Battlefield, he made no movement to retrieve as though he was begging someone to come.

"... No, I'm sorry. I should have taken that into account as well." Aina shook her head.

Leonel didn't reply, but he truthfully didn't blame Aina. Judging a decision by only its result and nothing else was foolish and it wasn't the kind of logic Leonel would prescribe to. However, that wouldn't stop him from feeling like this.

He stroked Little Blackstar's head, hoping to soothe the little mink just the slightest bit more.

"What happened?" Aina asked.

"Blackstar's Shadow Domain clashed with another Shadow Sovereign's Domain. He wasn't ready for the backlash and now he's hurt."

The three youths, hearing the term Shadow Sovereign, froze. That little beast... was a Shadow Sovereign?! The mixture of jealousy, apprehension and darker thoughts was almost immediate. However, the heavy atmosphere around Leonel seemed to snap them out of such thoughts.

They weren't fools. That sort of oppression wasn't normal and should even come from a rare type of ability. The number of families they could think of that had such abilities was all too small, and each one of them was from astounding families.

They had great backgrounds themselves, as did pretty much everyone in the Void Palace. But, there were still levels and degrees of separation to be found everywhere.

"Then it's a failure?" Aina asked.

"No... It wasn't a failure." Leonel explained. "The Domain of the second Shadow Sovereign was just a small point toward the center of the hive. For whatever reason, they had shrunk down their Domain to an incredibly small degree, at least in comparison to what their true abilities should be. It's likely that there are other reasons for this.

"Regardless, Little Blackstar managed to find us several points toward a true exit."

Leonel explained all of this calmly and evenly, his voice not wavering in the slightest. Everything about his demeanor was steady. However, Aina could almost feel his fury.

Although it had just been for a few split seconds, Leonel had already memorized the images Blackstar had shared to him perfectly without missing even a single detail. He knew the location of a true exit, what could be found there, and he also knew the exact locations of every entrance in a section of the network.

"That Shadow Sovereign likely knows we're here then..." Aina concluded.

"Yes. They will know that we're located somewhere within the range of Little Blackstar's Domain. But..."

"I truly hope they come."

Leonel's hair danced lightly in the air, a smoldering crimson flickering in his irises.

## Chapter 1355 Come Again?

Aina didn't say anything toward Leonel's words. But, seeing the state Little Blackstar was in, her expression, too, turned cold. She had been too wrapped up in her initial guilt to feel the same rage Leonel did. But, after that faded, it wasn't a surprise that she didn't feel too differently.

However, for the three listening to this conversation, they felt like they were listening to an insane pair of people.

You wanted to meet a Shadow Sovereign? Excuse me?

Just judging by the state Little Blackstar was in, this Shadow Sovereign was most likely at least within the Sixth Dimension, if not higher. The fact they had deployed their Shadow Domain here also likely meant that they were a Rapax!

It had to be understood that Rapax with non-physical type Ability Indexes were extraordinarily rare. Often, they were taken to be cripples by their race. However, there were a small percentage of this already rare contingent that were seen as even more valuable than those with the most powerful physical type Ability Indexes.

In this case, a Shadow Sovereign would most definitely be among this number. This meant that this Rapax wasn't just a Runed Rapax, it was definitely an elite amongst Runed Rapax and would be treated as such.

But, this was just the tip of the iceberg. That was because there was a hidden struggle between Shadow Sovereigns that only involved them. Each Shadow Sovereign was a unique sort of existence, but it was also very difficult for them to improve as a result.

However, swallowing another Shadow Sovereign's Domain was an easy shortcut to this sort of improvement. It wasn't a matter of if this Shadow Sovereign was coming, it was a matter of when. With Little Blackstar in such a vulnerable position, he was practically easy food.

The fact that Little Blackstar was a beast only made it all the more enticing because his Beast Crystal could be taken and swallowed as well, allowing the Rapax to benefit twice over.

They should be running for their lives, not standing menacingly out in the open as though they couldn't wait for confrontation. That was suicide!

The middle young man finally couldn't seem to take it anymore and stepped forward.

"Listen, I know exactly how my words are going to come off as, but I don't care. Our lives are on the line here. It's fine if you want to stay and get revenge for your beast companion, but we can't risk our lives along with you. If you could tell us which direction is closest to the exit, I would greatly appreciate it."

The young man was known as Ogier. He tried to choose an approach that was respectful, but also forceful in what he was asking. He didn't want this to devolve into a battle, but if it had to, he was ready nonetheless. He had no will to risk his life for the sake of a little beast he had just met.

At the same time, he knew that he had no right to ask for information this very same little beast had risked its life to get. However, without this information, he didn't believe he could survive. Toward such

ends, he could only choose the path of the hypocrite. No one would care about this in ten years when he was alive and these two were dead.

However, what Ogier hadn't expected was...

"That direction. You can go now."

Leonel pointed straight between two of the entrances and toward an expanse of fog. He didn't particularly care whether these people stayed with them or not. And, the truth was that he hadn't wanted to take them along to begin with. The only reason he had was because of his conscience. However, since they wanted to go, he wouldn't stop them.

Ogier froze. He opened his mouth to say thank you, but then he suddenly thought of a large problem...

What if he was lying?

His heart began to beat out of his chest. Technically, they were all still in competition, right? What if Leonel wanted a convenient method of dealing with them?

Ogier didn't know what to say or do for a very long time. He couldn't even think of a way to ensure that this was the truth.

"Are you lying to us?"

The only young woman of the three stepped forward, her brows knit into a frown.

"Roxane—"

"We need to ask. If he's sending us off to our deaths out of spite, then wouldn't we be dying for nothing? It's true that he doesn't owe us anything, but that wouldn't give him the right to screw us over, right?"

The last of the three stepped forward realizing that there was only one side of this issue that he could stand upon. If he didn't side with Roxane and Ogier, he would have no way of confirming his own safety as well.

Leonel met the momentum of the three across from him with a deadpan expression. Quite frankly, he wasn't in the mood, not at all. This was the absolute worst time for anyone to antagonize him. He was very close to attacking and leaving them here to rot in their own foolishness.

Even though he could understand where they were coming from, he simply didn't have the patience for it. The fact they had run into him in the first place was already a blessing for them, but it seemed that they hadn't realized this. Even their previous battle had only ended because his father had scared the Rapax they were fighting away.

"How exactly do you expect us to prove this to you?"

Surprisingly, it was Aina who spoke instead, her expression frosting over as her battle ax vibrated.

"There's a simple solution. You seem to care about your beast partner and it's in far too injured a state to help you in battle regardless. Give it to us and we'll follow your directions. That way we'll be rest assured in the fact you aren't lying to us."

Roxane had hardly finished her words when she felt her knees go weak.

"Come again?" Aina asked coldly.

Chapter 1356 Bully

It was oh so very convenient. The logic was sound and there was nothing wrong with it in a perfectly neutral sort of sense. Taking Little Blackstar with them would definitely guarantee that it would be in Leonel's best interest not to lie to them, after all, he cared about his beast companion surviving, right? It was clever.

However, it was from that point that everything else collapsed.

Leonel owed these people nothing. Why would he leave his little brother with three individuals he had just as little trust in as they did him? On top of that, just because he hadn't said anything about it, didn't mean that Leonel didn't notice their shift in demeanor when learning that Blackstar was a Shadow Sovereign.

Just how convenient was this? They got to force Leonel to hand over someone dear to him, and in their minds, he would likely die seeking revenge and then they would get a convenient and very valuable beast to use or sell in the future.

Was there anything in the world that could be so good?

If it wasn't for Aina stepping forward first, Leonel would have likely already lashed out, his smoldering fury bubbling over to deal with these three before he met the thing that had put his little brother in such a state.

"I'll give you all three seconds to get the fuck out of my sight, or I'll make it so that you can't even if you want to."

Aina's aura pressed down on them from above and it suddenly became obvious why she was the only one who seemed completely unmoved by Leonel's own every time.

"You..." Roxane brows jumped, but the fiery glow of Aina's golden eyes seemed to suppress her impulse to react before it could even manifest.

A menacing darkness loomed over head and Aina's canines grew as delicate black patterns ran over her skin. The oppression seemed to triple in an instant, only growing with every passing moment that went by.

Leonel's gaze shifted from the three before them to the intricate tattoos forming on Aina's toned back. They followed her curves and gave her a bestial sort of aura that was highly enticing.

'Abyssal Panther...'

Leonel had almost forgotten that Aina had gained this treasure from Terrain and most importantly, had forgotten exactly what that meant and represented.

It wasn't entirely Leonel's fault... he hadn't been there when Aina first unchained herself from her curse and City Lord White had called her a... Blood Sovereign.

Leonel was still ignorant to this, or even what such a title even meant. But, what he did know were two things. First, Aina could do what other humans could not in absorbing beast blood and taking their strengths as her own. This meant she could essentially create any Lineage Factor she wanted so long as she had the blood to do it. And second, her existence was a lethal attraction to Invalids, and especially Variant Invalids.

In her rage, Aina's blood had begun to boil and her Abyssal Panther blood resurfaced, giving her a carnivorous edge.

The first second felt like an eternity, but the second second whizzed by so fast that it felt like they had been thrust into a pot of boiling oil. Their feet lit and their hearts threatened to jump out of their throats. Without a word, they dashed away, feeling the oppression about to suffocate them from all sides.

The three clenched their fists as they picked a tunnel to rush into, unsurprisingly in the direction of Leonel's finger.

'If I wasn't so injured...' Roxane's nails dug into her palms, soothing herself with these thoughts of revenge and excuses.

Ultimately, they were geniuses in their own right, how could they feel good about any of this? Now they could only hope that Leonel truly hadn't lied.

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"... You didn't run into any Invalids while you were away?" Leonel suddenly asked.

Aina's back was still faced toward him and he couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her slowly receding tattoos.

Aina turned back and smiled like a blossoming flower. It was just a simple question, but its meaning meant the world to her. Leonel was actually asking about her wellbeing. She didn't think she would miss something so simple, so profoundly.

"A small bit. I entered a Sub-Dimensional Zone of the Silver Empire a few months ago and ran into some trouble there... But I came out fine."

Leonel's brows shot up when he heard the words Silver Empire. It was an interesting coincidence.

After a moment, Leonel nodded. Aina's words seemed to remind him of something else. As much as he wanted to control everything, there had been certain points where his people had been just fine on their own. His brothers had survived years in the Dimensional Verse without him, Aina had been through countless life and death experiences when he was nowhere to be found, even the likes of Savahn had been all on her own for a very long time.

It was easy for him to only see things he had been through and filter everything through that lens, but there were people around him that had arguably been through worse. Every time he tried to shoehorn them into needing his protection, he was actually belittling them.

"Have you thought about finding more powerful blood to ingest?"

"I'm holding back on doing that for now... I'm very close to grasping a new, evolved Force. Once I do, I'll burn away what remains of my curse and breakthrough."

"Oh? You're still holding back, huh?" Leonel chuckled.

Aina grinned. "It's okay, you're still handsome when your face is swollen. I don't mind protecting you for a few more decades."

"Decades?" Leonel scoffed. "Like I said, I can beat you right now."

"Maybe you can, but would you?" Aina blinked innocently, stretching her arms down toward her back and clasping her palms to rest on her ass. She leaned forward slightly and almost instantly, her chest seemed to double in size, her eyes glittering as she observed Leonel.

Leonel opened his mouth to respond but suddenly found that his throat had dried out.

Damned hormones, they had failed him again.

Leonel shook his head and looked away. "Come on Little Blackstar, let's go kill some Rapax. She really thinks she can bully us into submission."

Aina's smile brightened as Leonel turned and walked away. She hadn't been this happy in a very long time.

She sent a glance toward where the three youths had disappeared before entering a different entrance with Leonel.

...

Not long after they had left.

BANG!

A Rapax fell heavily from above, its silver body rippling with power and strength. Its head turned from side to side, eyeing three entrances before it made a choice and dove into one.

Chapter 1357 Easy to Trust

Aina thought about going to kill those three, it would make her feel more at ease. Plus, there was also the chance that she would be able to take the final step toward earning an Amethyst Token if she did. But, she decided against it.

For one, she didn't want to waste her and Leonel's time. Plus, though she knew Leonel likely wouldn't stop her, he wouldn't be ecstatic about it either. He was always soft when it came to that kind of thing and Aina wasn't fooled by his newfound bravado. Under the surface, he was still very much the same Leonel. If anything, he was only being more open with his true self around her. The core parts of his character had always remained unchanged.

"There's no need to be so eager. Karma has its way of working things out."

Aina shook her head. "You? Believing in Karma? You could come up with a better lie, you know. You just don't want me to kill them."

Leonel smiled, lightly stroking Little Blackstar's head. The little one was doing a bit better now, but Leonel could still feel him wince from time to time. He was too sensitive to Little Blackstar's usual state to miss when he had shifted so far from baseline. Others might have a hard time reading a beast's emotions, but that wasn't the case for Leonel, especially when it came to a beast he was so intimately familiar with.

A small distraction was exactly the kind of thing Leonel needed right now. Usually, such a thing would be almost impossible to find in a place like this, but he happened to have Aina by his side. As much as she had missed his care, Leonel had almost forgotten how much he liked to just... talk with her.

Leonel didn't get to do much talking these days. His most recent intimate conversations were with a thousand year old ghost, and the other was in a drunken state he would rather forget... If Raj ever let him, that is.

In a lot of ways, during their time together, Aina had become his best friend. This was maybe the greatest aspect of their relationship he had been ignoring the fact he missed.

Though they had been cordial over the last few days, and even somewhat close, there had always been a barrier there that neither had crossed, Aina out of respect and Leonel out of... stubbornness?

But, this was why the words of his father were so profound to Leonel.

He remembered that day he was in the Mayan Tomb, a naked girl kneeling over him and threatening to choke what remained of his life out of his body. Back then, he had realized it was his 18th birthday and he sighed in relief... He had sighed in relief because if he died after his 18th birthday, it would no longer be his father's burden, his dad wouldn't have to feel guilt, he would have done his duty in getting Leonel to adulthood.

It had been so long since then but the sentiment still hung over Leonel's head... But his father's words seemed to snap him away.

There wasn't some demarcating line where a father stopped being a father and a son stopped being a son. Leonel's logical brain had tried to make it like that, but it simply wasn't how life worked. To his dad, he was probably the very same baby boy he had been more than two decades ago.

His father's words had sounded sharp and grating, but to Leonel, they were like a pass... His father reminding him that it was alright for him to take his time to grow, that he didn't have to be perfect immediately, that he still had his old man protecting him to his front.

When it came to his father, it was very easy for Leonel to trust.

"Maybe not Karma in the normal sense, but the old ghost has told me a lot of interesting things about Force and how it breathes life into everything around it. It made me think, if Force is the underlying foundation to all that there is, and every action causes a disruption in it, then there might very well be some supernatural balance that keeps everything in check.

"Who knows, maybe Karma is real, then."

Aina blinked. "Old ghost?"

"Ah..." Leonel laughed, he had forgotten that there were now things in his life Aina was completely ignorant to. He was so used to telling her everything and her knowing everything he meant that he hadn't considered an opposing world view.

When Aina was caught up with Wise Star Order and everything related to him, her brows shot up.

Unsurprisingly, she didn't like the idea of Leonel being in a constant death match with an old man so much more seasoned and experienced than him. But, it seemed that there would be no convincing Leonel otherwise so she could only take a step back in this regard.

Aina fell into her thoughts, her mind suddenly feeling as though it was blooming toward something new. The words Leonel had used to explain how Wise Star Order viewed the Dimensional Verse weren't things that she had ever heard before. No... It was more accurate to say that she had known of them, but she had never heard them stated so clearly and firmly.

It made her wonder... Was this how her intuition worked? Did the Force speak to her like it had a life of their own? Is that what was always whispering to her whenever she made a decision about her training? Whenever she chose ingredients for a meal or a pill concoction?

Aina's breathing grew deep and unhurried, her gaze glazing over for several moments.

Seeing this, Leonel smiled but didn't say anything. It seemed that she was having another breakthrough.

Right then, Leonel's gaze suddenly sharpened. He gently placed Little Blackstar on Aina's shoulder before his figure vanished.

In the very next instant, he had appeared dozens of meters away, soaring through the air above the head of a Runed Rapax.

His eyes glowed with a hidden crimson light, a murderous intent erupting from him.

Chapter 1358 Couldn't

BANG!

Leonel's fist flew forward like a falling meteor, shattering the metallic carapace of Runed Rapax before him.

From start to finish, it had been an absolute slaughter. What had started off as a Rapax stalking their position had immediately turned into an all out assault.

In one moment, Leonel had been by Aina's side, in the next he was above a Rapax's head, his fist falling as though an ice infused rock through the atmosphere.

His gaze flashed with a hidden Rune, his body covered in a destructive crimson coating that seemed to burn everything in its path. In a single strike, a Tier 9 Fifth Dimension Runed Rapax had fallen without even a method to fight back.

As cautious as Leonel had been last time, he didn't even bother to store this Rapax away before it died. His foot stamped down on its neck, shattering its spine and severing his head from its shoulders. Then, he ripped out what remained of its spine, taking with it its tail.



He snapped it all together, squeezing tight until the joints crumpled together into a long makeshift polearm with a scorpion-like blade on one end. It alone was easily over three meters long but Leonel didn't seem to care at all.

Ignoring the dismembered corpse, he took his new 'spear' and turned back to find Aina waiting with Little Blackstar in her arms.

"Don't look at me like that, there was really nothing I could say this time." Leonel said.

It was true, the Rapax had just fallen from the skies and it tried to stalk them, maybe because it had more questions than answers about certain things. It wasn't exactly the situation for Leonel to explain things before he acted.

"No, you definitely could have, but that's not what I'm looking at you for. You got stronger again."

"Oh, that. I was teetering on a breakthrough before I fought the Sixth Dimensional Runed Rapax and I broke through just before I beat it. It's pretty useful."

Aina's irises twinkled. Her senses weren't as sharp as Leonel's, but her battle sense and intuition was on a different level entirely. She could tell that Leonel's force output, as in the strength in his arms and legs, hadn't changed at all. And yet, somehow, his damage potential had skyrocketed enough to make a Runed Rapax look like playdough. The difference was enormous.

Of course, the only Runed Rapax Leonel had fought until now was a Sixth Dimensional one so he didn't have an appropriate gauge for how powerful they were in the Fifth Dimension. But, they still knew enough to know that they should be more powerful than that.

This 'breakthrough' Leonel was speaking of was the formation of his Scarlet Star Rune. He had been on the verge of forming it before and just barely managed to against the Sixth Dimensional Runed Rapax. Unfortunately, against it, it hadn't been enough. But, against its lower Dimensional counterpart, it was a different matter entirely.

In its presence, things tended to become far more fragile than they really were and even without any additional force output, it was as though the world scaled down in its sturdiness to benefit Leonel. Plus, it felt more pointed and controlled.

Leonel was a bit confident now that he could use a spear without destroying it, but he still chose this route instead so that he could fine tune some things. This spear would do him well enough for now. Plus, he felt that he was close to Tier 6 after forming his Rune and he didn't want to have to lose another spear under the whims of a sudden breakthrough as his Eighth Star formed.

Aina, though, didn't take her off of Leonel.

"I know I looked very valiant just now, but I have a head between these broad shoulders." Leonel feigned hurt. "You can't just look at me like a slab of meat."

Aina was caught off guard for a moment before she sputtered. She knew this was Leonel's way of getting her back for just moments before. Maybe only these two could so casually banter this deep into enemy territory as though there wasn't a hunter coming at them right this moment.

"That's not it. It's just that your dad seemed to have done something to you. You don't feel any different? Nothing's changed?"

Leonel paused for a moment, not answering immediately.

The two broke out into a run once again, heading down the winding tunnels. Leonel's sense of direction was immaculate and despite the number of twists and turns they took, he was always able to point out the very same direction he had pointed out to the three youths that had followed them.

He only had two goals in mind. The first was to avoid the center of these nests. There was no doubt that they were the most protected regions and they would also have the most powerful warriors. The center was where the eggs should converge and be located, so it made sense they would be the most heavily guarded.

With this goal in mind, he had to ensure that the paths he took brought him closer to the direction he wanted to go while not locking them into an obvious death sentence.

The second goal, obviously, was to continue to head in the direction of the nearest exit.

"I'm not sure. It both feels like I've changed and that I haven't. My mind is clearer and more relaxed, my number of split minds increased another tenfold from ten million, and I've suddenly thought of countless other ways to use my Ability Index.

"But, I also don't feel different. It just feels natural."

Leonel knew that there was something off. His Ability had gone from being suppressed back down to Tier 3 to suddenly being stronger within Tier 4 than he had ever been in a benign environment. He had no doubt that if he returned to a lesser world now, he would experience another huge burst to his Ability that was still being hampered here.

It was just that... he couldn't understand why.

[Fallen Apostle's reception has been amazing!! Thank you all for the support!!]

## Chapter 1359 Square One

Leonel had been aware that his father had been tinkering with his body for a long while. Maybe it took a personality like Leonel's to not be bothered by it in the slightest.

The first oddity was obviously the vomit smoothies he had been forced to drink for as long as he could remember. His father had been so insistent that despite hating it with all his being, Leonel still never missed a single day.

In the end, it seemed to have been worth it. Originally, Leonel had thought that it was designed to strengthen his body. Right after the Metamorphosis, his body seemed to undergo odd burst periods where his speed and strength would increase faster than they should for a person without using a special training technique or method. But, after reawakening his Innate Node, Leonel became almost 100% certain that the smoothies were actually for the purpose of providing enough strength to allow him to accomplish such a feat, something he hadn't quite understood was an enormous deal until meeting Wise Star Order.

However, now, Leonel was suddenly not so sure anymore.

For one, the entire reason he had had such an enormous store of Anarchic Force within his body to begin with was because, according to Wise Star Order, he had stolen energy from the Regulator. If the energy he needed to reform his Innate Node came from the Regulator, then what role did the smoothies play?

Was he overthinking things? Had he been mistaken? Or was it that both had played a role?

Leonel suddenly felt that he understood far too little about his dad. The man was messing with his son's body as though he had access to the knobs that defined everything that was him.

'That old man probably knows how to create Lineage Factors, I don't doubt it at all.' Leonel thought to himself.

Leonel shook his head, his mind somehow both absent and running a million miles an hour at the same time.

His father seemed to be dealing with a burden he wasn't telling anyone about. Leonel wanted to help, but there was really only so much he could do, not while he was still so weak. This was another large part of the reason he had made the decision to set aside the King nonsense for now to focus on blooming his own strength.

As for how he would do that, he would just continue almost the path he was already on, focusing on comprehending his Innate Node. He hadn't forgotten that that ticking time bomb was still looming over his head. At the same time, he also had to gain a firmer comprehension of his Ability Index as well, though that no longer seemed to be as important now that he could access Tier 4 on the Void Battlefield...

Wise Star Order had said that Leonel's Dream Force affinity was far too high for the level of mastery he had over his Ability Index, but he still had no real idea how to use it. This situation seemed to answer the question of 'how' quite well. His father had sealed a portion of his Ability, or at least what seemed like his Ability.

As for what extent, by Leonel's estimation, it should probably be a level infinitesimally close to the Savant realm. If he was truly a Savant, he shouldn't be able to utilize Force or comprehend the Universal Cycles, so this was the best explanation he could come up with.

Of course, Leonel had thought of the wild possibility that his father had actually suppressed his Ability from the Savant levels down to normal ranges precisely so that he could do what Savants normally could not. But, after some more thought, Leonel felt that this was likely not the case.

While it wasn't the first time his father had accomplished something impossible, this felt like far more of a special case.

During the months Leonel was bedridden and couldn't move, he had had a great number of talks with Wise Star Order and in that time, he had come to understand Savants a bit more. The main reason Leonel thought it was impossible was because suppressing the Ability of Savants wasn't a rare ability. No, it was rare, it was instead more accurate to say that all those of a certain level of power could do so.

This 'power' referred not to individual power, but rather the power of a family or Organization. The suppression and control of Savants was an entire sort of industry in and of itself, and it wasn't as difficult as it might seem, or else Savants would rule everything.

In fact, the favored method of Organizations and families that had savants was precisely to suppress them from Tier 5 down to a lesser Tier 4 or Tier 3. In extreme cases, it was even possible to suppress a Savant down to the point they had no Ability to access whatsoever, exactly like Earth had done with its Savants.

The methods ranged from as simple as Earth's which only required isolating the Savants from Force, to far more sophisticated methods wherein Savants might even end up permanently crippled without special intervention.

This was all to say that even in such situations where Savants were suppressed to lesser Tiers, they were still unable to do as Leonel could do and begin to increase their strength as a normal person would. The moment you were born a Savant, you were forever cut off from such things.

And, that didn't even consider the biggest elephant in the room.

If Leonel was born a Savant, he would have never been gifted an Innate Node by the Regulator to begin with. Savants couldn't have or form Nodes, so they likewise couldn't have Innate Nodes. In addition, if a Savant were to be given control over Scarlet Star Force, they would be similar to Elthor and his Chaotic Particle affinity. They wouldn't be given an Innate Node to begin with.

This evidence left Leonel at a bit of a loss for how to comprehend his father's actions. It truly felt too disjointed and none of it made sense. So, he was right back to square one... Not understanding a thing.

#### Chapter 1360 Profound Analysis

It wasn't all bad, though, this gave Leonel a chance to breathe a sigh of relief. Without having to worry about the weakness of his Ability Index for a while, he could focus on his Scarlet Star Innate Node like he had wanted to.

The formation of a single Rune seemed to remind Leonel of just how far away he was from comprehending it entirely. This singular Rune was just a small branch of a small corner of a small segment of a small piece of the overall Natural Force Art that called his Innate Node home. Having comprehending a single one, his Force seemed to flow smoother and his Destructive capability had skyrocketed. But, other than this, it was just a reminder that he was weak.

"If I had to improve, what would you say I have to do?" Leonel suddenly asked Aina.

The two had been running for quite a while, but the tunnels were far too expansive. They hadn't even run into another Rapax in over an hour.

Leonel's sense of direction had remained true and they were getting closer to their destination. Right now, Leonel could imagine them curling around the center of this particular Nest, avoiding its core regions while slingshotting closer to the exit.

This method would take longer, but it was also safer. And, with the boost to his Internal Sight, Leonel could ensure that it stayed that way. As much as he wanted revenge for Little Blackstar, there were only

so many Shadow Sovereigns the Rapax could have. Not to mention the fact they were a rare breed to begin with, the Rapax rarely awakened such Abilities as well. To Leonel, this meant that he would be able to find this individual again in due time so long as they didn't die.

"You're asking me?" Aina raised an eyebrow. "I don't know if I'm the best to ask. The path I take is different from yours."

Aina and Leonel never really interfered in each other's training, they just left each other to their own devices. So, Aina was a bit caught off guard by this question as well.

"I want to know your opinion. When our minds connected, you felt it too, right?"

Aina blushed slightly. That experience was a bit... Well, she had definitely been impulsive. But, whether it was true or not, she still felt that allowing Leonel into her mind like that had made it far easier for him to make the decision he had just moments ago.

She wasn't wrong in thinking this either. Though Leonel had tried to ignore it, Aina's emotions had hit him like a ton of bricks. But, as he had said, he was very good at closing himself off from such emotions.

Aina had mostly been able to ignore that moment because she fell into a deep sleep right afterward. But, now that Leonel had brought it up, all those memories kept rushing back. It was just a shame that Leonel's mind was far too complex for her to truly understand in that short span of time. Unlike Wise Star Order, she couldn't shift through millions of minds in the blink of an eye.

"I did but... It was too vague. It was hard to get a read on you because you have too many split minds. And, at the same time, my Ability weakened a lot when applied to another person."

"That's fine, just tell me your perspective."

"I... Well, I don't really need to tell you what my Ability thought, I can just tell you what I think from observing you.

"When you said you could beat someone as powerful as me ten out of ten times, I don't think you were lying, but I think that's actually part of the problem. Well, it isn't objectively a problem, but it's rather a problem relatively speaking considering the path you seem to be taking."

"Mm?"

Leonel was intrigued. He was interested in what Aina wanted to say.

"Right now, you are focusing on your Innate Node, and rightfully so. Most probably should do that, especially if you're on a ticking time clock like your Ancestor said. But, given your battle style, it might make more sense to focus more on your Ability instead.

"Your raw battle strength isn't your greatest strength, your mind is. Battle Sense is something that's difficult to quantify and it's especially so for you. Within a certain reasonable range, even without time to prepare, I would think that there are a rare few people you can't defeat. If you had time to prepare, I think that even outside a reasonable range, you could still find a path to victory.

"But that's exactly the problem. Honing your strength requires repeatedly nailing down your strengths, then doubling and tripling down, it's all about reproducing results and making sure that your battles are

almost formulaic in their outcome. In my opinion, the strongest warriors are those that can force any enemy to fight on their chosen battlefield. Then, upon making said enemy meet you on your terms, you can reproduce the same victory again and again.

"You, though, are the exact opposite. Because your mind is your greatest asset, the more variables there are, the more randomness and variety, the higher your chances. But, because of that, you can't reproduce your results. Every victory looks different, and you don't mind meeting an enemy on their battlefield.

"This can look like a good thing, but what it also means is that a large majority of the training you do ends up being wasted. For every 100% increase to your overall strength, the strongest person you can defeat increases by a marginal amount until you trigger a watershed. Sometimes the return is even worse.

"One day you might double your speed, but you're just as content to not move a single step in a battle so long as you think this is the best approach to victory. At the same time, you might break through in your bowmanship, but you won't even bother to use it if you can think of a better method.

"Because you approach battle like this, focusing on anything other than your mind seems like a waste of effort. Or, at the very least, it should be your main focus."

Leonel fell into silence. He knew that Aina would have something profound to say. But, this... Was still beyond his expectations.

What should he do?