

Descent 61

Chapter 61

Soon after Montez's words fell, the long magical counter appeared once more. It seemed to stretch to the left and right endlessly.

Leonel's first instinct was to get the best Zone Analysis Device he could. The price for lacking information was simply too steep. Just a single mistake could result in a failure. If such a thing happened, his life would be over.

“‘| Uncle Montez, are there’ | Escape treasures?”

Leonel suddenly thought of something. From what he had seen, it seemed it was impossible to find a device with 100% accuracy. At the same time, he didn't believe that the only remaining path in case of a mistake really was death.

Hearing these words, Montez grinned.

“Of course. However, they're all one time use items. In addition, they also only work for one person at a time. So, unless your whole team has one, you'll be branded as a Deserter and hunted by your world.”

Saying these words, Montez's gaze flashed with a cold light. It seemed he wasn't new to such people.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

“Aside from this, escape treasures are limited by their strength as well. A Tier 7 Black escape treasure can only escape Zones below Tier 8, for example.”

After a while, Leonel hesitated again.

He didn't know the truth behind his dad's past, but what he did know was that he knew more than he had told him to this point. Leonel believed in his father. Since even he could tell how important Zone Analysis Devices were, his father wouldn't leave him hanging, right?

'That old man told me he left something in the basement for me. If it's not a Zone Analysis Device, the next time I see him, I won't acknowledge him as my dad anymore.'

Leonel silently harrumphed in his mind, clearly still somewhat unsatisfied with his father's abrupt departure.

Leonel sighed. "What do you suggest, Uncle Montez?" PANDA NOVEL

He could only ask this question again. Though he knew what he wanted to some extent, he wasn't sure which tier of treasure he should allocate to which. In the end, he was lacking in too much fundamental knowledge. If it wasn't for his ability, he probably wouldn't have lucked into such a good Force cultivation method.

Montez stroked his chin, apparently trying to appear like a wizened elder. But, he was lacking in the beard department.

"Which of your Lineage Factors did you awaken?"

"Which?" Leonel frowned at the wording.

Montez coughed. "I mean what is your Lineage Factor?"

Hearing this question, Leonel suddenly remembered that both he and Aina couldn't really figure his Lineage Factor out. Maybe this was a good chance. $\rho \int \sqrt{\dots}$

"I was meaning to ask you a question about that. My Lineage Factor is a bit weird. It seems to only activate when I wield a spear. It's very subtle in its effects, but I feel that it has great poten 'i'"

Leonel's voice trailed off. Well, it wasn't that it trailed off, but rather that Montez's boisterous laughter completely drowned out his words. No matter how Leonel thought about it, he couldn't understand what was so funny about what he had just said.

"That bastard's probably rolling in his grave right now, HAHA! Wait, he's not dead yet, HAHA! He'll definitely pull his hair out when he finds out, HAHA!"

" ' Um' Uncle Montez?"

Montez seemed to have finally realized that Leonel was here with him, but it still took him several moments to stop laughing and wipe the tears from his face. In fact, there was a point where he grabbed Leonel's wrist without a care for the grime covering him and burst into another fit of laughter.

"Is there something wrong?" Leonel asked worriedly. "Usually Lineage Factors are boosts to speed or strength, right? Why's mine related to a weapon?"

Montez waved his hand. "Those are low level Lineage Factors. Forget it, it doesn't matter much. I'll help you out."

"Should I pick a good spear?" Leonel asked.

"No." Montez smiled, but didn't explain his words. "A spear is the last thing you need. Soon, you'll have more than you know what to do with. Just keep the one on your back for now."

Leonel's expression only became weirder. But he had given up on asking questions. Montez clearly wanted to torture him, whether it be by his palm or with curiosity.

"Instead, there's something better. Here."

Montez clapped his hands and the counter quickly shrunk once again. The items left only made Leonel more confused.

There were five items in total, all of which fell under the Tier 7 Black grade.

The first two were lumps of what looked like unrefined ore. They had a silverish grey hue to them, but sometimes looked like clumps of coal when the light hit them just right.

PANDA-NOVEL The third item was a pair of black gloves. They seemed plain at first glance, but upon closer inspection, there were complex vein patterns running all across it. However, they were barely noticeable due to the fact they were black as well, albeit of a vaguely deeper shade.

The fourth item was a quill. It was quite a beautiful pen with a silvery and flexible tip. The feather attached to its back was a pure white and had faint fluctuations of wind around it. Leonel didn't know what beast this feather was from, but he was certain it had an ability related to wind.

However, even among all these odd, seemingly disjointed items, the last was even a level weirder. It was' ; a glob of liquid metal?

At first, Leonel thought it was just a silvery metallic ball. But then it became a puddle of goo. And yet after that, it became a small mountain range.

It kept flickering between its forms like a fickle child, painting all sorts of extraordinary scenes. Though, it still followed the law of conservation of mass. It never became something beyond itself and was kept confined within a small space.

The object itself was so odd that it wasn't until it became a simple silver cube that Leonel realized it had actually been encased in a glass cube. Now, it was just spreading itself to conform to its container as though looking for a way out.

When it failed, it slumped back down into a puddle, its surface burping with bubbles as though sobbing.

Seeing its personified actions and almost human-like emotions, Leonel's heart felt a slight pang. He felt bad for the little guy.

[Bonus chapter for 800 powerstones. Please don't reach 1000, *cries*]

"What? What is all of this?" Leonel finally said, prying his eyes away from the blob of silver.

"Those are ores. These are gloves. This is a quill. And this is liquid metal."

Seeing Montez's smug grin, Leonel felt the sudden urge to hit the man for the first time. He had eyes, he could obviously see these things. What he wanted to know was what their purpose was and why Montez would tell him to use his rewards on them. From what Leonel could see, these things weren't helpful to him at all.

Montez seemed to have not seen Leonel's glare. However, he displayed a surprised look when Leonel actually nodded and pulled the five items to his side, signaling that he had accepted.

Montez's mouth opened to say something, but he held back in the end. He felt even more stifled now than Leonel had. How could he continue to make fun of this kid if he acted like this.

'He a good kid, but it seems even he has a temper, huh? Almost as annoying as' | PANDA-NOVEL.COM

Leonel gave up asking Montez questions. He knew that there was probably a good reason for why he couldn't tell him more. It was best to just focus on the good these rewards would bring him rather than anything else. He still had a Tier 8 and 9 Black treasure to pick, and a Quasi Tier 1 Bronze reward as well.

'I already had [Call of the Wind] to help my long distance attacks. But, even though I modified it to help my spearmanship, it would probably be better to have a real spear technique. Right now I'm relying too much on instinct but don't have any real idea how to wield this thing.'

Leonel thought back to how he had just randomly picked up this spear from a gang of humans and smiled wryly. It could be said that he stumbled into this Lineage Factor of his.

However, the truth was that Leonel was far more interested in his own ability. The potential Dream World had was inconceivable. If taken to its logical extreme, there might even come a day where he could simulate Zones and not even need a device to do it for him.

Of course, that was still too far from him now. As things stood currently, his accuracy was barely above 70% for matters between the Third and Fourth Dimensions. If he tried to simulate Black Zones, which were instances of the Fourth Dimension influencing the Third, his accuracy wouldn't even be 50%.

There was another matter as well. Using Dream World was a great drain on his spirit even for something as focused as forming a Force Node. He couldn't even imagine the drain of attempting to simulate several months worth of events. PANDA NOVEL

'I don't have enough information. I don't think Zone Analysis Devices simulate months worth of events either. There's definitely a simpler way, I just don't know what it is!'

Leonel shook his head. He was wasting his time thinking about matters too far beyond him. He still had to remember that there was a time limit.

"What do you think, Uncle Montez? I need a spear technique, but I'm not sure if I should use my Quasi Tier 1 Bronze reward on it or not."

Montez shook his head. "I don't suggest you pick a spear technique at all. You aren't even aware of the basics. In addition, if you add more information before you're ready, it will influence your ability to sense your Lineage Factor before it has matured."

Leonel smiled bitterly. Didn't that mean he had made a mistake again? He had already technically learned such a technique. Should he stop using it?

"Then is there a method among the rewards that can help me learn about my Lineage Factor? Or maybe strengthen it like [Dimensional Cleanse] could my ability?" PANDA NOVEL

Montez shook his head again. "Lineage Factors are tailored to specific families. The methods to learn and strengthen them are kept close by said families. If your Lineage Factor is the result of the future influencing the past, you can only muddle through on your own."

Leonel was speechless. And here he thought that the future influencing the past was a great thing. But it seemed that those with great backing still had an advantage.

Taking a deep breath, he settled himself down.

“I would like to see all the full bodysuits you have at the reward levels I’m looking for. They must have a self-cleaning function. I also want to see everything you have that can draw Force Arts. And lastly, I want to see everything that can help my movement speed.”

Leonel was very much aware that his greatest weakness was still his speed. It had managed to catch up, but this was only under the influence of his One Star Cleansed Body. He wasn’t certain if the effects would continue. In addition, having trump cards to escape dangerous situations didn’t sound so bad.

PANDA-NOVEL With a clap of Montez’s hands, the counter expanded once more. Leonel’s gaze was filled with all sorts of bodysuits or various shapes and sizes, in addition to an assortment of shoes, talismans, and even temporary tattoos?

“As for the treasures that can write Force Arts’!” Montez grinned mysteriously. “That quill I gave you is more than enough.”

Leonel’s brows raised, but didn’t say much more.

“Then instead of that, I want a treasure that makes things more convenient to carry. Aina gave me this belt that shrinks things’! But I’m kind of embarrassed to keep relying on her like this.”

“Hohoho, Aina is it?” Montez gave Leonel a lewd grin.

Leonel ignored Montez who soon clapped his hands once more causing the long display table to expand once more.

In the end, Leonel chose his three items.

With his Tier 8 Black reward, he picked out a bland, black bracelet. He was shocked to find that it had a small space in it about two cubic meters in size. If he lay his spear diagonally within it, it wouldn't be a problem to put it in. Though, Leonel didn't plan on doing this.

With his Tier 9 Black reward, he chose another pair of shoes that could disguise themselves as sneakers.

This was when Leonel found out some unfortunate news. No treasures beneath the Bronze tier could increase his stats after they reached 1.00. So, he couldn't find something that increased his speed any longer. However, he felt that this reward was even more useful.

These shoes could produce a platform to jump off of! All Leonel had to do was circulate some Force into them and time them to activate after he leapt into the air, then he could proceed to do a 'double' or even 'triple jump'.

The only unfortunate part was that they had a one minute cool down, so Leonel could at most walk two steps across the air. But, it would be useful nonetheless. Had he had these shoes against Joan, she wouldn't have been able to run from him so easily.

Finally, with his Quasi Tier 1 Bronze reward, he chose a silver chain necklace with numerous small runes etched onto it. It had the ability to produce a transparent, pale blue membrane. This membrane could fuse with his clothing, making them more difficult to tear, increase his defense, and it had a self-cleaning function as well, making it perfect.

Chapter 63

After he completed his selections, Leonel turned a pair of pitiful pale green eyes toward Montez and finally got the right to use the pond again to clean himself. Unfortunately, though, it seemed his stats weren't influenced by it at all.

'Have the effects of dad's vomit brews ended so quickly?'

Leonel frowned. He found it hard to believe that this was the case. He downed those brews for 17 years without missing a single day. If he did the math of the sheer volume he had digested, he would feel a hard to ignore urge to gag.

After a moment, Leonel could only toss these thoughts to the back of his mind. His father never told him exactly what those vomit brews were for. For all he knew, the stat boosting effect was just a side product while its true purpose was more hidden.

'Maybe I'll find out more after I make it back home' ; Should I bring Aina to the Empire's gathering place first? Or should I take her home with me?'

Leonel wasn't a fool. Although he knew some truths behind how sinister the choices of the Empire had been, he also knew that trying to break free from them now would only mean death.

If technology was really going extinct, he might have chosen to sever ties now. However, the wrist watch proved that the Empire still had some hidden methods. Plus, who knew how many more families like Aina's there were and how many of them had sworn allegiance?

For now, Leonel had no choice but to swallow some grievances.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

There was another possibility as well. Uncle Montez had mentioned that he could buy a ticket to another world in exchange for a Tier 9 Black reward. If worse came to worst, Leonel would look into this method.

[PANDA-NOVEL](http://PANDA-NOVEL.COM) Leonel shook his head and left the pool, feeling refreshed.

Now that he could finally see his skin again, he realized that it had become softer and more elastic, not to mention the fact he couldn't see his pores no matter how hard he stared. It was like he just came from his mother's womb.

It was a good feeling that left him smiling to himself.

After a bit, he had put his clothes back on. The shocking part, though, was that the rips in his sweat pants were completely healed. They looked like a new pair he was wearing for the first time.

Leonel realized then that this was an ability of his silver chain necklace. Not only could it make his clothes harder to tear, but it could repair tears that already occurred as well. He finally didn't have to walk around like a beggar anymore.

Sliding on his tight fitting compression shirt reward he had received from his first Zone, Leonel grinned.

PANDA NOVEL

Though he could put his metal box of darts in his bracelet, he chose to keep it by his side with the help of Alna's belt. It was more convenient this way.

"Uncle Montez, how much time do I have left?"

"Mm, since it was a Tier 7, you have about a day left I guess."

"Good."

Leonel's gaze sharpened. There was something he really wanted to do, and it could only be done here.

With a thought from his Internal Sight, Joan's golden polearm appeared in Leonel's hand. Leonel felt it was a bit unfortunate he hadn't had the time to take Nigelle's bow as well, but it couldn't be helped.

Montez swept a glance at the polearm, but he didn't remind Leonel that it wouldn't be able to be taken out of here. He was sure that Leonel knew of this already, or else he wouldn't be wasting his time studying it. ρ??∪???????

As expected, Leonel's ability had grown once again.

After forming his First Node, he grasped Dream World. This ability helped him to form his Second and Third Nodes with ease. After a few more days, forming his Fourth and even Fifth wouldn't be a problem at all. In fact, Leonel could tell that the time frame had shortened thanks to the Star formed in his mind.

Leonel's new ability couldn't be considered completely separate from Dream World. At most it was an extension. Leonel even had the faint feeling that most of his newly comprehended abilities would be like this. But, he didn't mind at all.

He called this new ability Dream Sculpting.

Dream Sculpting, making use of Leonel's ample spirit, could scan and create a replica of an object in Leonel's mind. It had to be said that Leonel's spirit was directly proportional to his Internal Sight. So, Leonel was essentially constructing a model of an object and building a copy of it in his mind.

Obviously, it was impossible to use this copy. It was simply an image in his memories. However, this memory had many uses.

For one, it was more robust than his other memories. Observing this memory would be no different from observing the true object. And, secondly, if this memory was pulled into his Dream World, he could use his simulation abilities to test out several things.

However, this was the true beauty of Dream Sculpting.

Normally, Leonel's simulations have barely above 70% accuracy. However, if coupled with Dream Sculpting, under the condition that all the tests are solely related to the sculpted object, the simulations he could run would exceed 99% accuracy!

There was only one bottleneck for this ability, and that was the object itself. Depending on the object's grade, it could be harder or easier to Dream Sculpt it. And, Joan's polearm just happened to be quite difficult.

It took Leonel over 23 hours to succeed. And by the end of it, he felt like all the energy in his body was drained. He even felt that his ability had gone dormant without any spirit to fuel it.

Luckily, he still had enough time to replenish himself by entering the pool once more. He came out with a massive grin on his face. Though he didn't know if the polearm's Dream Sculpt would be useful in the future, at least he had a proof of concept for now.

Leonel bid farewell to Montez with a satisfied smile on his face, happy to get the chance to see Aina again.

A light blinded Leonel for a moment, and when he could see again, his mood sank. He had almost forgotten the sorry state the world was in. Collapsed buildings and cracked sidewalks were still littered all around him.

However, his mood brightened again when he saw Aina's silhouette not far from him. But soon, even that was ruined.

"Another one, huh?" A male voice cut off Leonel's thoughts.

He had a bad habit of ignoring everyone else when he laid eyes on Aina, so he hadn't even noticed that there were three others here.

"The two of you are under arrest. This was designated as the region of an S-grade Zone. The two of you have entered without registration and without permission. Please do not resist, or you will only make this harder on yourselves.

"Place all of your contraband into this black bin and allow yourselves to be taken in. Your belongings will be confiscated to the proper authorities."

Leonel's smile faded, leaving an expressionless visage as his gaze met the equally dull expressions of the three military men.

Chapter 64

Though Leonel was expressionless, his mind was spinning. Should he acquiesce? He was obviously unwilling to give up things he spent his blood and sweat on, but how could his current self match up against a monstrous existence like the Ascension Empire?

Leonel was a kind hearted person, but a pushover was something he wasn't. In a world controlled by nobles like those who frequented his Royal Blue Academy, those without spines were eaten up and spat out with impunity. The fact Leonel was so well-liked and admired, even despite his entertainment profession, made it obvious he wasn't such a person.

In addition to this, Leonel wasn't a fool. He knew that those who could clear an S-grade Zone were not many, so the treasures he had on hand now were most definitely rarities amidst rarities. Just hand them over? Was that some sort of joke?

Of course, these thoughts were just his immaturity seeping through. He knew it wasn't smart to have such thoughts without proper backing. The true reason he felt that he shouldn't do this was because it just might be possible that he did have such backing. He didn't know what his father was involved in, but regardless, he was certain he wasn't easily dealt with. At least not by these common, everyday government officials.

"You're here." Aina made her way to Leonel's side somewhat subconsciously. It almost seemed like she hadn't heard the words of the three officials.

Leonel smiled lightly, before turning his attention back toward the three men.

"According to the laws of the Ascension Empire, I have the right to ask for your proof of identity as well as your rank and station."PANDA-NOVEL.COM

With Leonel's ability, coming to a quick and logical decision to no more than the blink of an eye.

"Are you resisting arrest?"

Leonel inwardly sneered. He knew that those in positions of power never liked to be questioned. Even if it was the law, they'd find an excuse to not answer his question not because they couldn't, but because they found it humiliating to do so. There was no shortage of those like this in enforcement positions.

You would think that with their Gene Analysis tests, the Empire would be able to weed these people out from such professions. But it seemed not.

“Resisting arrest? Sir, to be frank, you three aren’t a match for the two of us. You said yourself that this is an S-grade Zone region. You should also have information that this Zone was constructed for the entry of eight, yet do you see anyone else other than the two of us?”

Leonel sent a glance toward Aina, but she seemed to have not heard his words, looking off into space blankly. This reaction made him feel a bit stifled. It was like that time she killed Conrad all over again. He couldn’t read her. PANDA NOVEL

However, as expected, the three men stiffened as though just realizing this. It seemed that many still hadn’t adjusted to the new world order quite yet. They were too used to normal citizens having no means to protect themselves.

Leonel could obviously see their stats. Even the strongest among them only had their highest stat barely reach 0.70. Of course, Leonel didn’t foolishly think that this was enough to defeat them. It was unknown what abilities they had. In addition, if the Empire really kept tight control on technology now, then it was likely their guard dogs held some of this power as well.

If these guards had guns on them, even Leonel would be at a loss. Firearms from the 1400’s already gave him a huge headache, he definitely didn’t dare take them head-on. Firearms from this day and age were a completely different animal. He wouldn’t even know how he died if he dared to go up against them.

The more Leonel thought about it, the more certain he became. If he was as sinister as the Emperor, using the Metamorphosis to eradicate all instances of technology while keeping the only functioning machines with himself would be the perfect plan to hold onto power’ ;

Leonel grew even more serious.

“As you can see, Sirs, if we wanted to resist, we could have already. So, will you answer my questions, or not?” PANDA NOVEL

Despite his apprehensions, Leonel could only continue forward.

“ ‘| I am Tier 3 Officer Farlier, assigned to Perimeter 3 of the Royal Blue Fort task unit.”

Leonel remained expressionless, but he inwardly sighed a breath of relief. As long as he had this initiative, it wasn't a problem.

A Tier 3 Officer had the same standing as a Tier 3 Government Official. Leonel's father had been a Tier 5 Government Official. Though, that wasn't very helpful now considering he was already 18 years old.

Such an Officer could be considered a step away from an elite. At the same time, he was at the very top of officials who dealt with normal civilian matters. Meaning, he had high standing, but when facing potential noble scions like Leonel and Aina, he had no choice but to be cautious.

Of course, it helped that Leonel and Aina were so calm.

“A Tier 3 Officer can make decisions about an S-grade Zone?”

Leonel raised an eyebrow, immediately catching onto a problem. There should be very few who would even dare to enter such a Zone, let alone succeed in clearing it. This was by definition something that could only be handled by elites. In that case, how could a Tier 3 Official make decisions about it?

The Officer's face reddened slightly, but he hid it well beneath his deadpan expression. It was just unfortunate for him that Leonel's senses were too sharp.

PANDA-NOVEL “I don't mind if you escort us to someone who can make such a decision.” Leonel's voice became like the officer's saving grace. “However, giving you my treasures is impossible. We didn't enter this Zone to disobey the orders of the Empire, we did so because if no one cleared it, we would have been mobbed to exhaustion by Invalids who were swarming toward it.

“I'm sure you, as a Tier 3 Officer, know of the Ascension Steele's First Amendment, right?”

The three officers looked at one another, bitterness clear in their gazes.

The Ascension Steele was not much unlike the fallen American Empire's Constitution. No matter the state of the Empire, even if it was under martial law, the Ascension Steele's words held the highest precedence.

The First Amendment was known as the Right to Autonomy. It was an all encompassing law that allowed the disregard of other Amendments as long as there was sufficient cause.

As one might imagine, such a vague law made it so that those with power got away with far more than they should while those without were out of luck.

However, in this case, Leonel and Aina really did have such power. It didn't matter if they falsely regarded his ability as a D-grade one, the facts showed that he had the ability to clear an S-grade Zone. At least for now, it was impossible to disregard this.

“ ‘! Come with us.” Officer Ferlier finally said.

With that, they led Leonel and Aina to a large black jeep with three rows of seats.

‘A natural gas vehicle? With wheels at that’!? So they're relying on such old technology to keep their hold on power, huh’!?’

Leonel's eyes narrowed, but he didn't struggle and got into the car. His next move would all depend on how the rest of the day went’!

He looked out of the tinted windows, watching the sun slowly set in the distance.

Chapter 65

[Bonus chapter for 200 powerstones *hiccup*, next at 400 :!<]

Leonel wasn't surprised that the Royal Blue Fort held the same moniker as Royal Blue Academy. The reason why the Academy had this name in the first place was due to its proximity to the Royal Blue River which directly fed into the World Sea. In fact, they weren't far from the coast even now.

Earth, in this age, only had one large ocean body "" though, this ocean body had numerous separating currents and the like.

After unifying the world, the Empire made amazing technological advances, eventually unlocking terraforming abilities that not only helped colonize the Moon and Mars, but also control the shift of tectonic plates.

The current Earth was not unlike Pangaea of the past. As a result, there was just one ocean.

'I wonder if there is just one universe' ! Is it Earth that's evolving to the Fourth Dimension? Or is it our universe? Or maybe it's on a smaller scale like our solar system?'

Leonel's brow furrowed and he tossed this to the back of his mind, He simply didn't have enough information.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

If only Earth was evolving, that meant their colonies would be left behind. If not' ! The Empire would have many more variables to contend with.

This aside, the Royal Blue Fort was the fortified government building of the Royal Blue Province. There were a total of nine Provinces, and unsurprisingly, in terms of economic output and the overall wellbeing of its people, the Royal Blue Province was also ranked third just like Royal Blue Academy was.

However, whether that would continue to be true from now on was unknown. As a flourishing Province, Royal Blue Province had many industries, but among them, real estate had an exceptionally great place here. This was precisely due to its location near the coast.

Paradise Islands that had orbits that passed over the ocean were highly sought after. Those who were poor saw Paradise Islands as prisons that kept them from the surface, but for the rich and powerful, it was a good way to get away for a few days and even seen as a great vacation spot.

With such an important source of income gone now, it was obvious that Royal Blue Province would likely be on a downward trend from now on.

However, this also represented opportunity. PANDA NOVEL

The nine Provinces were ruled by nine Governor Dukes. Obviously, the Governor Duke of Royal Blue Province, Governor Duke Leum of the Leum family, wouldn't want to see his power wane and thus might be more willing to let a few things slide' ;

Along the way, it wasn't rare to come across Invalids. However, the jeep was clearly built for these situations as a high level armored vehicle.

With the S-grade Zone gone, this was no longer a hotbed of powerful Invalids. The various F to C-grade Invalids they ran across were easily mowed over or outrun.

Such a situation made Leonel all the more serious. Without this jeep, he and Aina could just as easily deal with these Invalids, but the Officer driving it most definitely could not. This was the advantage technology gave.

The more Leonel saw such a situation, the more certain he was that acting rashly just because he had a little bit of power now was a foolish thing to do.

In Leonel's hands, a cube with a bouncing blob of silver could still be found. When he had wanted to put it into his spatial bracelet, Montez gave him another palm to the forehead, saying that living organisms with strong Life Force couldn't be placed into such things. PANDA NOVEL

" ; So you're living, huh? I wonder what you are' ;' Leonel observed the little blob of silver performing tricks as though to cure itself of boredom.

PANDA-NOVEL Aina sent a curious glance over, but it seemed she was also unaware of what the blob was. And, since she had ignored Leonel's implied question earlier, she felt it would be a bit too shameless to ask about it. So, the two sat silently at the back of the jeep.

Soon, a looming wall of steel that stretched 20 meters into the sky appeared, causing Leonel's eyes to narrow. He had seen this government building before, but it most definitely didn't have such walls in the past.

After a complex series of protocols and bypassing the gates, the jeep slowly rolled into the Fort.

Royal Blue Fort was like another world. Unlike the wreckage on the outside, it was organized, clean, and even had clear hallmarks of diligent city planning. If one knew nothing about what was going on outside, it would be easy to believe that this was just another day'

The only clear difference here was that technology had regressed. With a quick glance, Leonel could tell that other than the street lamps that illuminated the dimming light of dusk, those who frequented the streets didn't have personal tech of their own.

The buildings were mostly residential apartments separated into street blocks. In addition, there seemed to be one grocery store and an entertainment center per street block, but there weren't many people using them. This could have either been due to a curfew, or maybe they weren't so simple to use. Leonel felt it was likely a combination of the two.

It didn't take long for the jeep to reach the core of the Fort. Since the Fort itself had a diameter of barely ten kilometers, it wasn't very large.

The engine cut and the sounds of opening doors made Leonel take a deep breath. Steeling himself and calming his heart, he took a step out, an aura of authority exuding from his body.

Aina smiled lightly but didn't say anything. She knew that Leonel wasn't trying to pressure anyone on purpose by doing this, he just had a habit of taking even the smallest things incredibly seriously, let alone something that likely involved his life and death.

However, his actions caused the three officers who brought them here to break out into a cold sweat. At this point, they were no different from the students of Class A who suffered Leonel's torment all these years.

At that moment, they felt like Leonel was a wild beast that might swallow them at any time. Even the imposing walls of the Governor Duke's mansion felt like they had shrunk several folds.

“Leo!”

Suddenly, Leonel's suffocating aura vanished as a familiar figure appeared from the large, towering double doors of the mansion.

Leonel blinked before smiling lightly.

“James.”

The name had hardly come out before he was engulfed by a bear hug.

Chapter 66

James' boisterous laughter filled the night sky.

PANDA-NOVEL “You dog.” James punched Leonel's shoulder. “You actually disappeared for half a month with my sister-in-law, since when were you two moving so fast?”

Leonel laughed and shook his head. It seemed that James was still the same old James.

“We had to save your ass. Who asked you to be so useless.” Leonel rebutted.

James stumbled backward, putting a hand to his chest as though he had truly been hurt.

Leonel's banter with James was light hearted and fun, but it made the officer's break out into another cold sweat barely moments after surviving through their first bout.

Though they didn't know who Leonel was, they definitely knew who James was. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

Beneath the Governor Duke's family, there were several other supporting families of great, albeit lower, standing. James' Bennett family was one of these forces, or how else could he be coming out from the Governor Duke's mansion?

The truth was that this place looked like a mansion from the outside, but it was more accurately described as an estate or maybe even a castle. It looked like one massive home, but the inside was separated into the living residences of several prestigious families.

In normal times, with how arrogant these families were, it was simply impossible for them to share space like this. Unfortunately, due to the apocalypse, space was limited. So, though they could live in better luxury than the normal citizens within the walls, they still had to bunch up as well.

That said, it wasn't as though they were suffering.

James finding Leonel here was actually just a pure coincidence. The towering double doors of the mansion were perpetually open. After all, it was just the entrance to an inner city of sorts and no one dared casually offend so many nobles.

He had been tasked with receiving some prisoners. Obviously, with their low standing, these officers had no right to enter the inner city. Since it was an easy method to gain some easy contributions, he had come. He had just never expected that the so-called prisoners would actually be his best friend and his 'sister-in-law'. PANDA NOVEL

"| This is ridiculous, don't even worry about it." James said with a casual wave of his hand. "I don't know what you did wrong, but I assume it has something to do with entering a Zone without first registering. But, considering the timing, you entered during the grace period."

Hearing these words, Leonel's sighed a breath of relief. He really would rather not fall out with the Empire so quickly. He didn't have the means of dealing with them, even if he wouldn't be chased with the full brunt of their power. Plus, Earth was his home. He would rather not escape to some unknown world.

James ignored the officers and led Leonel and Aina up the wide stairs and toward the looming double doors.

It should have been no different from crossing another threshold, but Leonel felt that upon stepping through the doors that he had just passed a misty rain. He blinked in shock, only to find that the scene before him was completely different from what he had seen from the outside.

It was like he had gone back in time to the day he left for school. Royal Blue City was back and the Paradise Islands hadn't fallen.

However, Leonel knew that this couldn't have been true. At best, this was a small replica of the once luxurious city. But what still remained unchanged was the fact that unlike the outside, this place had no restrictions on technology at all. ρ???(???????)

'How'!' Leonel's brows furrowed. 'Spatial abilities? This place seems bigger on the inside than it was on the outside'! There's even a sky here. What's going on? No, it's impossible for an ability to have such a large scale already'! right?'

"Cool, isn't it?" James grinned as he looked toward Aina and Leonel. It was rare that he could be aware of something these two Class A students weren't.

"Governor Duke's eldest son is managing this place while his father was recalled to the capital. Well, all Tier 6 officials and above were recalled. They want to clear out the Ascension Province and restore its peak glory as quickly as possible, so not to mention Tier 6 and above officials, even those monsters with S-grade abilities and above were recalled as well.

"However, they didn't leave us without any protection at all. The Junior Governor Duke also has an S-grade ability. He calls it Illusion Mist. From the outside, this Fort only seems to be ten kilometers in diameter, but the truth is that it's almost double that with most of the space being taken up by this hidden city."

"An S-grade ability, huh.." Leonel muttered.

The scope and power of an S-grade ability left Leonel feeling cold. To hide such a city right beneath the eyes of so many, and for him, even with his sensory abilities, to not even notice. He wouldn't be able to handle such a person in battle even if all of this Junior Governor Duke's stats were 0.10.

This was exactly why Leonel hadn't rashly attacked those Tier 3 Officers. Not only was he worried about their technology, he was also worried about what abilities they might have. Even if his stats destroyed them in all areas, what could he do against an overpowered ability?

It was the same as that metal bodied A-grade Invalid he had killed. Leonel's stats had still been better than it at the time, but its ability made it frighteningly difficult to kill.

Still, even with all of this being the case, Leonel remained calm. His ability didn't have such outstanding immediate effects, but he believed that its potential was no less frightening. If given enough time, his future prospects were unfathomable.

Leonel wasn't an ambitious person. He didn't have lofty goals or a hunger for power. Sometimes, he believed that it was precisely due to this disposition of his that the Gene Analysis results slotted him the way that it had.

However, Leonel was also maturing slowly. Currently, he had no goals or aspirations, but that was only because he hadn't decided what he wanted to do with his life yet. He was just like any other normal 18 year old, wandering a bit aimlessly.

That said, there were two things Leonel did know. For one, he wanted to help Aina. And two'! He didn't like the methods of the Ascension Empire. In fact, they sickened him.

If this was the case, he only had one task: grow stronger.

James' lip twitched when he felt his best friend start emitting that scary aura again. He had grown a bit used to it, but it still made his knees weak.

He knew that Leonel had a slumbering beast hidden inside him that only lifted its head every so often. If there came a day Leonel met something that let him completely release that beast'!

” | If you weren’t so soft, you would truly be a monster.’

“Come on. I was supposed to bring you to Tier 5 Admiral Millan. I was confused before, but you guys probably did something big, huh? It’s fine, my dad doesn’t fear that old guy. It should be easy to smooth things over. Plus, talent is exactly what we need right now.”

Chapter 67

[Bonus chapter for 400... next at 600... might as well not be bonus chapters anymore if you guys are getting them as regularly as normal updates >:| *sobs*]

The hidden city of Royal Blue Fort had its own government buildings. Though the escort of Leonel and Aina seemed lax, the truth was that this simply represented confidence.

From what Leonel could tell, there was something about the Metamorphosis and especially Zones that destroyed technology. He was only lucky that his bike didn’t use electricity to fold and unfold itself, or it too would have stopped working.

However, outside of Zones, the Empire had managed to keep their hold on technology. With such a reality being before Leonel right now’ | Was it even possible to escape?

Tier 5 Admiral Millan would have likely come to find them after they were thrown into a cell, but James completely ignored this and instead brought them directly to the military holdings.

The Admiral position was especially important in a coastal Province like theirs. Due to the vastness of the World Sea, it provided many opportunities for rebels. As a result, Admirals and their navies played a key role in dealing with these uprisings.

Though rebels were no longer the primary problem they faced, the dangers that lay in the oceans were likely even fiercer, now. Who ever said that humans were the only ones who could awaken abilities during this Metamorphosis?

“Admiral Millan! I’ve brought the prisoners.” James’ tone bordered on sarcasm. Who told this old fart to try and arrest his best friend?

James knocked on a solid oak door and brazenly raised his voice. PANDA-N0VEL.COM

The offices of the high level government and military officials were located in a place similar to a city hall. There were tall ceilings leading to curving glass windows, numerous thick pillars, and spacious floorings of expensive, high-class marble.

Tier 5 Admiral Millan’s office was located on the upper floors as per usual. A golden inscribed nameplate was nailed to the center of the door.

His secretary had been outside and was meant to field all visitors, but who would have expected James’ actions to be so overbearing? Leonel couldn’t help but smile bitterly.

He had a feeling that James was going all out to help him now as a repayment for the National Championship game. It made his heart feel a bit warm.

Soon, a short man of barely 5’4” opened the door. Though he wasn’t very tall, he had a strong, stocky appearance and broad shoulders. His hair was slightly greying and he had the most perfectly groomed beard Leonel had ever seen.

He might have had a small stature, but his air of command was undeniable. In addition, as an Admiral, what was the most important was his mind and strategic abilities, not his personal combat prowess.

“You brought prisoners here? The mission should have made it clear for you to escort them to the prison. What do you think you’re doing?”

Admiral Millan’s voice was deep and rumbling. It made Leonel feel like his very bones were vibrating beneath its waves. PANDA N0VEL

‘Is his ability related to his voice?... It must be!’

“You think I would let my friend and my sister-in-law rot away in a cell while you play your petty mind games with them?” James asked. “Plus, I have information on their crimes. They entered the Zone during the grace period. They had no choice or we would have been swarmed by Invalids.”

Hearing these words, Admiral Millan’s visage darkened further. How could he not know these things? Since they had sensed the energy waves of the Zone, they obviously knew when it appeared and when it had been entered. However, this was a rare opportunity to take advantage of a few kids that seemed to have power but no backing to speak of.

He had planned to soften them up by letting them stay in a cell for a few days and maybe weeks, then play the role of savior to get them out. Then he might be able to get them to seek shelter beneath his wings and become the vassals of his Millan family. But who knew that this would happen?

This was an S-grade Zone they were talking about! One meant for eight! Yet it was cleared by two people. The fact that these two hadn’t been recalled to the capital was a miracle.

Though his standing wasn’t the highest, it was still fairly high. He was aware that it was possible for talents to fall through the cracks. Reason being these talents would come from poorer families, as a result, the wrist watches they were given at birth wouldn’t be high-level and thus fail to accurately judge their talent.

This was a guess Leonel had already made long ago, a guess he was even more certain of after seeing how flourishing this hidden city was. With how important accurate information was within Zones, they were essentially playing with the lives of their citizens’!

But none of this mattered anymore. With James’ interference, even if he didn’t personally hold any power, the influence he had would be enough to expose Millan’s machinations. ρ??∪???????

Despite the whirlwind of emotions going through his mind, Admiral Millan was still a veteran who had seen death and war. His adaptability and his mind were what few could compare to.

“Alright.” He said simply. “Since a member of the Bennett family can vouch for them, this will make the process simpler. The treasures gained during the grace period, under the decree of His Majesty, can be kept by the two of you. However, they need to be properly registered, along with their abilities and names.

“In addition, from now on, the rewards you gain from Zones will first and foremost be considered the property of the Empire. You will gain Ascension Points in return which you can use to buy them back. Of course, since they were earned by your efforts, should you choose to buy them back, you will receive a discount’!”

Leonel sighed inwardly as he listened to all of these rules and regulations. Ultimately, what the Empire cared the most about was control. They wanted a record of every treasure that appeared on Earth, and judging by how many times Admiral Millan’s gaze had swept curiously across the cube in his hand, the matter wasn’t only as simple as this either.

“ ‘! As for the rest, I’ll allow James to explain it. This is an era of danger, but also opportunity. It isn’t impossible for you two to climb up.”

Admiral Millan’s words seemed laced in a deep meaning, but Leonel only smiled respectfully, thanking the Admiral before following James toward registration.

‘This registration process is likely so that the Empire can catch talents that might fall through the cracks due to their own scheming’! In that case, it might not be a bad thing if they can’t see through the potential of my ability’!’

Leonel’s thoughts were simple.

In a Zone, who could tell what happened? Weren’t the wrist watch on his hand and the team who followed him in the only things that could?

The second problem was easily solved. He only had to enter with those he trusted. As for the first, it was a bit more complex.

If his registration went well, the Empire would set his sights on him. They would give him a higher level wrist watch that would be able to more accurately read Zones. In that case, it would be nearly impossible for him to hide the rewards he received.

However, if he was deemed as unworthy of such effort, he would be allowed to keep this lower level device. For context, this was the same device that assigned the Mayan Tomb an F-grade in the beginning. What if the Empire thought he was only receiving F-grade rewards when in reality he was receiving C-grade or even higher treasures?

The benefits of this could be imagined. He could bide his time and slowly build his power.

Unfortunately' Reality was cruel.

[*Beep*]

[Subject: Aina Brazinger]

[Ability: *Name Unassigned*]

[Ability Type: Healing]

[Ability Grade: Error. Undefined. Unable to estimate potential]

[*Beep*]

pANDA-n0VEL [Subject: Leonel Morales]

[Ability: *Name Unassigned*]

[Ability Type: Sensory]

[Ability Grade: Error. Undefined. Unable to estimate potential]

The city hall building had seemingly grinded to a halt before James' laughter rang out.

“HAHA! My best friend and sister-in-law are two of those Variant ability monsters! We’ll see who dares to bully me now!”

He seemed to have completely missed how gloomy Leonel’s current expression was.

Chapter 68

In the end, Leonel could only sigh. He couldn’t have imagined that instead of making an incorrect guess, the scanners of this city hall would actually slot them into the Variant category. This could be considered to be even worse than Leonel’s worst case scenario.

According to James, Variants were individuals with abilities rated above the S-grade. There weren’t accurate enough devices to measure them, so they could only be lumped together. However, most importantly, all of these individuals had spotlights trained onto them.

Of those who survived the initial stage of the Metamorphosis, there were a few dozen who achieved this hidden grade of sorts. This number couldn’t be considered large, but it wasn’t small either.

Since the grade was so vague, there were obviously differences in strength between those who had this Variant title, but those differences were often not obvious, at least at the start. Earth was still in its infant stages, what would happen in the future was still difficult to decipher.

Leonel stepped out from the sphere Faraday cage-like device. It was constructed by numerous separate pieces of circular metals, attached to each other at two points and spread apart until they formed a ball shape large enough for ten humans to enter at once.

The moment he did, he felt like he wasn’t a human who had stepped out from a steel ball, but rather a hamster who had fallen from his hamster wheel.PANDA-NOVEL.COM

The feeling of being the center of attention wasn’t something Leonel was unused to. If it wasn’t for this catastrophic event, he would probably have tens of millions of fans watching him play football every week. But this was still a weird feeling.

The weirdest gazes came from those wearing what looked like lab coats, the symbol of Royal Blue Province's most prestigious research lab " Blue Pearl Research and Labs " embroidered onto their lapels. They looked no different from ravenous beasts looking toward a piece of fresh meat.

To scientists like them, the Metamorphosis was like a gift to a child on Christmas. Which of them didn't want to uncover the truths behind these mysterious occurrences? Humans might not have many redeeming qualities, but one thing they were was curious " and they felt an insatiable need to cure themselves of this curiosity.

The opportunity to study two Variants brought was simply unimaginable. How could they not be excited?

At that moment, the scientists who had all already swarmed Aina, split into a river of two and engulfed Leonel, who they had previously ignored, as well. PANDA NOVEL

"Leonel Morales is it? To think you would be a Variant as well! Please allow me to track your brain waves for a single month. I'll give you ten Ascension Points a day in return!"

"Don't listen to this old codger. Listen, listen. I only want you to wear this micro camera so that I can monitor and record your fights. You don't have to wear it all the time, only when you head out for missions. I'll give you five Ascension Points a day in return!"

"These old fools only know how to fight amongst themselves! You're a sensory type, right?! You're perfect for my research. Unlike these idiots who seem to believe you can only be the lab ra " I mean honorable test subject for one of us at a time, I have no issue sharing you. I only hope to meet with you once a week for help on a device I'm working on'!"

The chorus of white lab coat wearing maniacs made Leonel's lip twitch. Even Aina seemed bashful about all this. Her cheeks had a slight tint of red to them and she looked toward the ground to avoid their gazes. Such a scene made Leonel want to rush forward to protect her.

"You psychotic nerds! Don't you have any self-respect?!" p??J??????

PANDA-N0VEL Unfortunately, James' words completely fell on deaf ears. The scientists didn't bother with him even one bit.

At that moment, the basement floor of the fort's city hall received some more guests. The ding of a large elevator's descent could be heard before its thick steel doors slowly open to reveal several middle-aged men and women wearing serious expressions.

Their gazes swept over the underground lab to land on both Aina and Leonel who were both being swarmed.

Amongst them, Leonel easily picked out Tier 5 Admiral Millan. This time, his relaxed, but stern, expression had a bit of dark tint to it. Clearly, he knew how great the opportunity he had missed was now that Leonel and Aina were Variants. However, he also knew that this would have been exposed eventually, and his family wasn't qualified to hoard such talents to themselves.

The one in the lead of them, however, was a woman with wide hips wearing a tight knee length skirt. Her hair was pinned up in a neat bun and her delicate features were hardly hidden behind the frames of her glasses.

Much like her skirt, her blouse clung tightly to her curves, seemingly barely holding back the towering mounds on her chest. However, that view was partially obscured by the clipboard she held to it.

No matter how you looked at it, she was just a secretary. In fact, the identification tag hanging from her waist made this guess all the more obvious.

Though she was an outstanding beauty, a beauty not losing out to Joan no matter how one looked at it, she still shouldn't have been qualified to lead this small group of Tier 5 officials.

“Two great talents have joined our Royal Blue Fort, this is great.”

The secretary smiled lightly, her visage lighting up the whole room. She curiously observed Aina before turning her gaze toward Leonel, but she was surprised to find that the young man was only curiously gazing at her as well.

By her estimations, an 18 year old boy, at this moment, should be doing his very best to stop the next current of drool from falling from his lips. How could he so calmly meet her gaze? Did he maybe' ¦ not see women in that way?

Though she thought this, as a woman with her level of standing, it was impossible for one to be able to read her emotions from her expression.

“Ah, look at me, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Maia, Royal Blue Province's Secretary Marquisette. I can be considered to be the personal aid of young Junior Governor Duke, so I apologize on his behalf for not being here. However, he is currently in the process of clearing an A-grade Zone as we speak.”

A sudden flash of understanding overcame Leonel. Secretary Marquisette' ¦ That was a Tier 6 official position. Even Governor Dukes were just a single level higher. It was no wonder they were all so respectful to this woman.

Leonel had never expected the Secretary Marquisette to be so young. He also realized now that the reason he thought she was a normal secretary was because from his vantage point, he could only see a part of the tag on her hip.

“I see, it's nice to meet you. I am Leonel Morales.” Leonel smiled politely.

Aina gave a polite greeting of her own, but she seemed to have gone back to her quiet, stoic self. Leonel really couldn't understand how she flipped through emotions so quickly. One moment she was yelling at him, the next telling him he stunk, the next she was blushing, and the next she was a brick wall.

Women really were the bane of men.

“Since the formalities are out of the way, we should get to the important stuff. I'm sorry to tell you that until the Capital sends a proper response, the two of you won't be allowed to enter any Zones. This procedure will take at least a few months with the state the Ascension Province is in currently.”

[Bonus chapters for 600 powerstones, next at 800... Definitely going to make this every 300 ps next week...]

Though Leonel was inwardly seething, his expression didn't change much. He looked like that innocent boy who tricked Joan and her knights for all those months.

There were two reasons the Capital would try to stall for time like this.

One is that they wanted to slow his growth. Powerful beings were good for the benefit of Earth, but their existences would be difficult to control after enough time passed. Earth's current technology could probably put Leonel in a grave right now without much issue, but whether or not that would still be true in a year or more was still unknown.

The second reason was less sinister. It was possible that it really would take this long for the two of them to be accommodated for. It was definitely not easy to build those devices.

Leonel had no ability to deal with the wrist watch on his hand currently. Even now, he couldn't even damage it, let alone take it off. If this was considered low level, who knew how much more was put into those high level ones? Leonel couldn't imagine.

There was still one other reason Leonel didn't flip out though, aside from the fact it would be stupid to do so. Even if he couldn't enter the Zones' †; it didn't mean he didn't have other methods to grow. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

"Does that mean we'll have to sit idly for those months?" Leonel asked with a slight frown.

Even if Leonel knew it was foolish to have an outburst, it would be even more foolish to pretend nothing was wrong. If he didn't show any discontent, it would be even more suspicious.

"Of course not." Maia replied with a light smile. "Even if you cannot enter Zones, we still need your help to clear out Invalids. The sooner our Province can start running like normal again, the better. Those like you and Miss Aina will be the backbone of such efforts."

Leonel's internal sneer deepened. As long as he was on Earth and not sent back in time through a Sub-Dimensional Zone, how could any of his actions be hidden from them? Leonel wouldn't be surprised even if they assigned a satellite to monitor his every move.

'My own personal satellite. I can't lie, that sounds kind of cool.' Leonel lightly joked with himself in an attempt to better his mood.

After a few more rounds of empty words, Maia dismissed the other Tier 5 officials and personally monitored the remainder of the registration process. PANDA NOVEL

As the night waned, more and more of Leonel's secrets were laid bare, a process that only made him more and more uncomfortable.

PANDA-NOVEL In the end, Maia's lingering fragrance became like the venomous gas of a poisonous serpent to him. She was practically attached to his hip, reading his expression diligently as though trying to find if he was hiding anything else.

Leonel wanted to hide some things, but he ultimately decided against it.

In truth, he knew that he might have had some leeway. For example, the Empire's scanners seemed to have a problem with judging the merit of things at and above the S-grade. If not for this, why would the broad stroke 'Variant' grade exist?

If Leonel really wanted to, he could have passed off some high level treasures as being graded higher than they really were and use the excuse that he traded in his lower level rewards for them.

However, there were two reasons Leonel decided against this. PANDA NOVEL

Firstly, he simply wasn't confident in continuing to hide these things. Not to mention technology of this era, even technology of a few hundred years ago was already potent enough that no one could escape under its detection. Leonel wasn't foolish enough to believe that he was the exception.

How could it be possible for him to continuously dodge the scrutiny of countless eyes and cameras? In the end, he would be forced to never use those rewards again for fear of the retaliation his lying would cause. The trade off wasn't worth it. These rewards were too useful to him.

Secondly, there was an even more chilling possibility. What if the Empire was feigning ignorance?

Hadn't they already done so once? They clearly knew this Metamorphosis was coming, or else their wrist watches wouldn't be able to analyze Zones. Yet, they had said nothing.

Who was to say that their detection devices weren't several times better than what they displayed and they were instead keeping some things covert to weed out dangerous variables and potential traitors?

Such thoughts made the cold in Leonel's heart grow chillier.

So, for now, he obediently took out every one of his rewards, describing them all to the best of his ability. Even when he came to those five objects Montez gave him, even though he didn't truly know what they were, he still gave his best explanation.

“ ‘I was interested in Force Art, so I picked out these five things. This quill can draw Force Art, while these materials help in creating treasures that rely on Force Art.’”

This was Leonel's best guess. He believed that the pair of black gloves, the ores, and the special silver blob were all connected in some way.

Seeing Leonel so obediently bring out so many treasures and describe them one by one caused Maia's expression to ease.

Though she seemed in charge, the appearance of two Variants put great pressure on her. She wasn't lost to the fact this era had changed. Personal strength meant much more than it had in the past.

Unfortunately, her own awakened ability wasn't very great, though, she was still more than satisfied with it. It wasn't wrong for Leonel to be so shocked that she was so young, because the truth was that she wasn't. In fact, her 60th birthday would be very soon.

Of course, Leonel didn't know this, or else he might very well faint from shock.

This aside, she had a very good impression of Leonel right now and even found him to be quite adorable. Before she realized what was happening, she was treating him like her own grandson, seemingly not noticing that her current appearance of a 20 year old woman in her prime made it look more like she was flirting rather than doting on a youngster she was fond of.

Eventually, Leonel finished. He even decided to trade in some of his lower level treasures like his previous pair of shoes in exchange for some Ascension Points.

A long while later, he was brought to his living quarters.

As a Variant, it wasn't a surprise that Royal Blue Fort wasn't stingy with him. In fact, he received a large mansion near the core of the hidden city to himself. He didn't even know what to do with all of the space.

He collapsed into bed, staring toward the ceiling expressionlessly. A wave of fatigue assaulted him. It could be said that this was the first time in almost a year that he had had such peace. But, it was ironically peace given to him by obediently dancing to the tune of the Empire. It was quite a bittersweet feeling.

Leonel didn't even realize when he fell asleep. It wasn't until the sound of a ringing doorbell woke him up the next morning that he realized he had dozed off at all.

He had to practically sprint through the massive mansion for him to get downstairs in a timely manner, only to find a delicate beauty wearing a black military outfit filled with pockets waiting for him.

"Let's go do some missions." Aina said lightly.

Her voice was as refreshing as morning dew.

Chapter 70

Leonel was dazed for a moment before he blinked, a hint of confusion coloring his handsome face.

He had expected that once they came back, Aina would start avoiding him again. Now that they weren't in a Zone and couldn't enter one for a long while, she wouldn't have to feel bad about leaving him behind. But, he could have never imagined that she would actually come to seek him out first.

Aina was really too confusing to him. Did she want to avoid him, or not? Maybe she was moved by the words he spoke in Paris? Or, it was also possible that she decided that since he wouldn't give up on her, she might as well use him?

Leonel might have been infatuated to the point of causing others to raise an eyebrow when it came to Aina, but he wasn't a fool. The matter of her lying about the entry quota had definitely stirred something within him.

A part of Leonel wanted to believe that she wanted an excuse to spend more time with him, but he wasn't so vain. It was more likely related to her family's

Aina clearly had an even stronger motivation to grow powerful in comparison to Leonel. The most likely explanation was that she wanted as many rewards to herself as possible. Logically, then, entering with as few people as possible was the most beneficial to her.

Though Leonel knew this was most likely the answer, he didn't hate her for it. He too made selfish decisions without asking for her opinion first within the Zone. In addition, she wasn't trying to harm him. They did indeed have the capability to clear it alone. The only variables were related to the Zone teetering on becoming a Unique Zone, but Aina hadn't known this until they entered. PANDA-NOVEL.COM

“! Young miss!”

Leonel, who had been dazed to the point of staring at Aina for several long moments, was startled awake by a familiar voice.

Yuri, while holding up her skirt, ran forward like a delicate lady.

Leonel glanced in her direction, then looked toward Aina, then back toward Yuri once more.

Aina: “!”

“Did you run away from her?” Leonel’s lip curled into a smile he tried to conceal as he spoke, teasing Aina. PANDA NOVEL

“I picked a mission near where your Paradise Island might have fallen, you want to check it out, right?” Aina bit her lip.

Leonel’s smile froze, but it wasn’t out of anger or sadness. He knew that his father was fine now, so he hadn’t been as stressed about the matter. But, Aina didn’t know this. The fact she was so thoughtful warmed his heart.

After a moment, Leonel grinned and looked toward Yuri who was still running toward them with all the might she could muster.

His hand swept forward and grabbed Aina’s. It seemed it was Aina’s turn to be dazed now.

“Let’s run, then.”

Leonel grinned, slamming the mansion doors shut behind and sprinting through the streets with his arm, linked with Aina’s, trailing behind. PANDA NOVEL

Seeing such a scene, Yuri could only stop, her delicate features covered with a thin layer of sweat. She panted for a moment then stomped her feet, clearly unresigned.

Aina’s actions left her more than exasperated. In fact, she had an overwhelming feeling of anxiety swelling in her chest.

“ ‘! Miss! It’s too dangerous outside!”

Yuri’s words sounded like the wild ravings of an overly controlling maid. But, only she and Aina knew that her worries weren’t without cause, because this danger had nothing to do with Invalids.

**

Even hours later, Leonel’s wild grin hadn’t faded. But, this smile had nothing to do with being with Aina any longer. Rather, it had everything to do with the vehicle they were in.

Leonel excitedly pressed on the gas pedal, winding through the wreckage of buildings with glee.

He had never had the opportunity to learn to drive. Cars were too rare due to the densely populated cities. Everything had been boiled down to incredibly expensive public transportation.

PANDA-NOVEL So, when Leonel found out that he could take out one of these armored jeeps thanks to his level of privileges, he practically jumped for joy.

“ ‘! Can’t you drive a little slower?” Aina asked for probably the dozenth time.

“We’re almost there.” Leonel replied with a smile.

Aina wished she had several more seat belts. Leonel’s ‘almost there’ response had been the only reply she received in return in the last three hours. The words had completely lost all of their meaning.

At this point she could only swear to herself that even if Leonel pouted like a child, she would be the one to drive them back. She had lost count of the number of times the jeep almost flipped over.

Luckily for her, this time around, Leonel really wasn’t lying. They reached their destination in less than five minutes to find the sight of a wreckage that wiped the smile from Leonel’s face.

It could be said that the once glorious city was a mess. But until now, Leonel had still not laid eyes on the wreckage of a Paradise Island. It could only be described as devastating.

Like the crater of a fallen meteor, the surrounding several hundred meters had sunken deep into the ground. Let alone the remains of buildings, it was more accurate to say that the shattered remains of structures impossible to deduce the original form of were littered about in a wild and unconstrained way.

The subtle smell of rot pervaded the air. It wasn't obvious at first, and one could easily become used to it after a few moments, but it was exactly this that left Leonel feeling so stifled. All he could think about was the fact those who died here probably didn't even have corpses intact enough to produce a smell more forceful and obvious. Even in death, they hardly left their stamp on the world.

Leonel clutched the wheel of the jeep so tightly that the creaks of its breaking plastic and his whitening hands could be heard through the silence.

Unforgivable. This was truly unforgivable.

