

Descent 681

Chapter 681

Several minutes ago.

Leonel's rage disappeared like the wind after he entered the forest. He almost couldn't stop himself from laughing. He really hadn't expected things to work out even better than he had thought they would. He felt like this was what people called digging their own graves.

Aina shook her head and rolled her eyes. Unlike the others, she could clearly see that mischievous light in Leonel's eye.

The Leonel she knew wasn't very good at controlling his emotions in the slightest. If he was truly enraged, he would have just attacked and thought of the consequences later. The fact he never attacked meant that he wasn't angry to begin with.

The only thing Leonel really didn't expect, though, was for Ingkath, Irolana and Moos to actually follow him. As for his lovely girlfriend, wasn't that already a given?

If Leonel had to be honest, their following made his task a bit more difficult than it would otherwise be. Their strength was definitely not up to par with him and Aina. But, Leonel definitely wouldn't turn them away. In fact, he would remember this well.

Taking a deep breath, Leonel turned to the three.

Unlike Aina, they didn't understand Leonel very well. So, they had been just as fooled by his previous act. Seeing the solemn expression on Leonel's face, they felt their hearts seize again.

After a while, Leonel smiled. It was quite true that the world couldn't be painted in black and white. The very same Ingkath and Irolana who had drawn a line between them just months ago had actually chosen to side with him today. The human psyche was quite a fascinating thing.

“Alright everyone, take these.”

Leonel handed out another few packages of grenades.

“These... These are the grenades.” Moos asked softly.

Moos and the others weren't very surprised that Leonel had more even though he had said that he didn't previously. But, Leonel's next words stunned them.

“These aren't the same. The others could only injure a Tier 4 existence and kill anyone below that. This one can even kill anyone below Tier 6.”

The three youths trembled fiercely when they heard this.

Every step forward in the Fourth Dimension was considered to be massive. By the time one got to the difference between Tier 4, 5 and 6, you were talking massive gulfs one could waste a lifetime to cross.

Tier 7 to Valiant Heart Mountain was considered to be the absolute cream of the crop. Only blue belts touched upon such a level, yet these three could only lower their heads if they came across a mere white belt.

The idea that they could injure a Tier 6 with just one of these was baffling. Yet, Leonel had given them ten each. How could their hearts not beat wildly?

“Be careful when you use them.” Leonel advised. “Whether it's the Titan Hyena or the Oryx, I have a strong feeling that they won't work in the slightest, so don't even bother to throw them in their direction. You'll only be bringing down their attention toward you.”

The three nodded solemnly. But, Irolana soon raised a question.

“In that case, how do we use them?”

“To survive.” Leonel spoke bluntly. “Not long from now, the Oryx will definitely track us to this location. Trying to escape through the forest will be impossible, so we will be using the mines.

“If I’m correct, the King of Ores faction will definitely do their best to seal off the mine from new entries, so we’ll need to work fast.

“These grenades will be useful to you within the mine tunnels themselves. There will also be beasts that enter a frenzy down there. Use the weaker grenades on them, they won’t be able to harm the structural integrity of the tunnel

“If you feel that an Oryx is closing in on you, a strategic use of the stronger grenades can collapse a tunnel they would have otherwise used to pursue you.”

The three gulped hard when they heard Leonel. He made it sound like the Oryx were already right on their trail. But, didn’t night just fall?

Wait... night?

The three looked up into the sky, their legs growing weak when they noticed there wasn’t a hint of the sun left.

At that moment, the ground began to quake, the trees swaying from side to side as though they were juvenile rather than the thick ancestral beings they actually were.

“Get ready.” Leonel said solemnly.

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Senior Lu bit into his cheek, his expression jittery. He had managed to take advantage of his seniority to build a campsite as near to the cave mouth as he could. Unfortunately, in order to succeed in this, he had to be more aggressive than he usually was, causing many to feel off put by his presence.

To make matters worse, he wasn't even that close to the cave mouth. Under the order of the white belts, he had to be at least ten meters away.

The clearing was already only 20 meters wide to begin with. As a result, most were pushed into the camping in the forest. Though this was more comfortable than setting up camp on the hard rock, in terms of security, they felt as though they had none.

The freshmen found themselves feeling empty. Their minds were filled with such a perpetual fear that they couldn't even find it in themselves to relax. They realized then that their current state was a far cry from how at ease they had been during the day.

Though they were tired and spent from their trek here, at the very least, none of them felt as though their lives were on the line.

Even without the appearance of the Oryx, this suffocating feeling alone made them realize just how much they had relied on Leonel. Unfortunately, it was already too late to hold back anymore.

"Fuck this." One of the freshmen rose from their small sleeping bag. "What's there to be afraid of. Would one person really make a difference? How ridiculous."

No one responded to the freshmen's grumbling.

He stood, going a distance away to find a tree to take a whizz behind.

He sighed as a steady stream began to drizzle. He had been so scared before that he had truly held this in for too long.

The more relaxed he became, the more assured in himself that he also became.

"... Just blame yourself. Who asked you to piss off the King of Ores faction as a freshmen?"

The young man continued to mumble before his nose caught the whiff of something terrible.

“Fucking gross, who the hell is taking a shit here? Couldn’t you choose another place?”

The young man suddenly froze. It was night, so it was of course dark. But... Had it always been so dark?

His neck slowly cranked backward, only to find a massive silhouette looming behind him.

The young man opened his mouth to scream, but all that came out was a gurgle, his head sliding off his shoulders and plopping to the ground.

Chapter 682

A shrill scream shook the campsite, smells of blood and carnage hanging in the air. The Oryx hadn’t even tried to hide himself. Facing a group of such weaklings, why would it have to? Such things were meaningless in the face of true power.

However, had the four deserters who had died earlier in the day been present, they would have realized that something seem to be wrong. The Oryx they had seen had a massive crimson halberd strapped to his back. But, this one had a massive great sword almost as thick as its burly body on its back.

Unless this Oryx had for some reason chosen to change weapons, it was all but confirmed at this point. There was more than just one Oryx bearing down on them.

Senior Lu felt his heart seize. He couldn’t believe that his worst fears were already coming to fruition.

‘It’s just ten meters, just ten meters. It’s the blink of an eye. I can make it!’

The distance that separated them and the cave mouth was practically negligible. Senior Lu didn’t care if he had to trample over the corpses of his fellow freshmen, he just had to make it. As long as he did, he would be safe, he would live another day.

Without a care for the materials strewn around him, Senior Lu scrambled to his feet, not even looking back to the forest. He scratched and clawed to all fours before leaping up to his feet.

He bolted for the cave mouth with all the speed he could muster. For some reason, despite the fact his destination was right in front of him, despite the fact it should have only taken him two large leaps to make it, he felt as though it was a world away.

At that moment, his worst fears were realized... again.

The two seniors had already leapt to their feet.

“What the hell?! Already?!”

It was clear that they were caught completely off guard. They knew that the Oryx story Leonel had told was likely to be true, but shouldn't it still have taken some time to find this place?

At this point, they didn't care to confirm the appearance of the Oryx.

“Hurry up!”

“I'm on it already! You go do your damn job nagging bastard!”

The senior who spoke last stood with a ferocity, his feet stamping into the ground. The clearing of rock and gravel quaked for a moment, trembling beneath his Force.

“Senior! Please!” Senior Lu called out, panic clear on his face.

But at that moment, a strong wall of Force sent him flying backward. Horror painted his face as he watched a wall rise up from the ground. In an instant, a ten meter tall makeshift fortress surrounded the cave mouth.

Senior Lu scrambled to his feet, launching himself onto the wall and trying his best to climb it.

Once again, it was just ten meters, it was a distance that was harder to climb than run across, but he was still a Fourth Dimensional existence. Even if he couldn't jump that high in a Fifth Dimensional world, he could still climb it.

The makeshift walls were coarse and unkempt. There were more than enough dips and crevices for him to latch onto.

But, he had barely begun when a spike of earth suddenly jetted out for his chest. $\rho\text{??}\text{C}\text{??}\text{??}\text{??}\text{??}$

Senior Lu twisted to avoid it, displaying his small bit of talent. But the result was still the flesh near his hip being ripped through. If he had been just a bit slower, his hip bone would have been shattered to oblivion.

Senior Lu fell back to the ground, being thrown away from the wall.

“Let me in! Let me in! I helped you all!”

The more Senior Lu screamed, the more careless he got with his words. Who cared about offending seniors if he couldn't even live to reap the benefits of it? Soon, he began cursing, even insulting their mothers, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

By that point, many of the freshmen had long since caught up with Senior Lu. Some had tried banging against the wall, but those not as strong as Lu found themselves skewered. It was hard to tell if more freshmen had died at the hands of the Oryx who had seemingly yet to make an appearance or their so-called seniors.

On the other side of the wall, the senior who put up the rock wall, Hallis, sneered, his hand pressed flush against the wall as he sensed what was happening.

“Seith, are you done yet?!”

“Don’t hurry me bastard, just hold the wall! Oryx aren’t that intelligent anyway, as long as they had prey on the other side, they won’t bother with us anyway!”

“Why the hell is it taking so long?!”

“Do you know how hard it is to set up a controlled explosion?! I’m trying to destroy the entrance well enough that it can’t be dug through easily, but not bad enough that it takes the whole tunnel with it! Plus I have to put it on a delay!”

“Whatever, whatever! Keep your nerd speak to yourself. Just hurry up! Can’t believe those bastards left us with this job, dammit!”

Though Hallis said this, considering their abilities, they were the only two that could be left with such a task. Seith with his explosion ability and him with his control abilities.

Seith continuously drew Force Arts around the cave entrance. He had started on this a while ago, but he had never expected the Oryx to get here before he could even finish.

Unfortunately, in order to hide things from the freshmen, he had to be too subtle before, slowing him down considerably. But now that the cat was out of the bag, there was no need to take things slow any longer.

“Let us in! Let us in!”

In a desperate attempt, many no longer cared about the earthen spikes, rushing at the wall in an attempt to overwhelm it with numbers.

It was then, though, that an Oryx finally stalked its way out of the forest, its large figure pushing thick trees out of its way.

His massive great sword rested on his shoulder, the claws of his pawed feet digging into the coarse ground.

The Oryx was caked in blood. It splashed across his furred legs and clumped the hairs together. The result was a smell even more foul than usual.

The freshmen felt as though their souls had fled their bodies.

Chapter 683

Senior Lu slowly looked back, his head tilting up to see the massive, looming figure that had appeared. Just its weapon was larger than any one of them, let alone the Oryx itself.

Those that had been in Valiant Heart for a few years had all heard their fair share of Oryx Tribe horror stories. But, no freshmen had ever seen an Oryx personally... Or, more accurately, no freshmen had ever survived such an encounter to tell the tale.

Senior Lu's knees went weak. He fell to the ground, his eyes turning almost vacant as he looked up. At that moment, he along with every freshmen felt no different from those beasts who lost their minds to fear.

The foul smell of the Oryx was seared into their souls. It was the kind of memory they would never forget in their lifetimes.

At that moment, though, the Oryx looked into the skies. As though none of them even existed, he focused all three of his eyes into the clouds, training his gaze on something that seemed to be flying.

Leonel looked down from his surfboard, his gaze twinkling.

'What a monster...'

This was Leonel's conclusion after just a single glance. Compared to humans, if the measure was pure combat ability, the Oryx were superior in everyway. Their digitigrade legs made them faster than any human of similar stature could hope to be. Their muscle structure stored more than ten times more energy. Their bones were more than tenfold sturdier. And their eyes... There was something deeply unsettling about them.

As though this wasn't bad enough, those of Valiant Heart seemed to think that the Oryx weren't intelligent, but Leonel's dictionary hadn't said a word about their poor intelligence. Just looking at the eyes of the Oryx before him, Leonel didn't even need his dictionary to know that these Oryx were no less intelligent than any human.

Leonel held Aina in one arm, the three freshmen standing in a row to his back. It was difficult for the surfboard to fit all of them on, but they just managed it.

"Okay. I'm going now." Aina said softly.

With a leap, she plunged onto the other side of the wall, falling down heavily between Hallis and Arfire.

The two seniors were stunned. A flying treasure?

Maybe it was only at that moment that everyone realized that Leonel had never been worried about his survival from the very beginning. Had he used his flying treasure from the start, he could have already made it back to the mountain pass.

The freshmen who realized this felt a second wave of guilt assault their souls.

Leonel pulled out his bow, nocking two arrows. However, he didn't raise it.

"How about it, Mr. Oryx? Why don't we both take a step back?"

The Oryx continued to stare at Leonel without saying a word. But, it was at that moment that a translation he could comprehend drifted to his ears.

The Oryx's expression changed, his tusks vibrating slightly. However, it was just for the briefest of moment.

By this point, Aina had an ax at Hallis' throat. Senior? Since when did a mere white belt pose a challenge to her?

At that moment, though, Leonel wasn't feeling relaxed in the slightest.

An intelligent creature like the Oryx would know that at Leonel's current vantage point, it was at a great disadvantage. Even someone as powerful as this Oryx wouldn't like to be used for live target practice. But, that was exactly what would happen if it couldn't find a way to deal with Leonel in the skies.

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However, at that moment, though it was hard to tell.... Leonel was certain this Oryx was smiling, the blood on its body slowly trickling to the ground beneath it.

At that instant, Leonel's pupils constricted.

“Hold on!”

With barely a warning, Leonel rolled the surfboard to the side as a beam of red shot into the skies. It continued for so long that it seemed intent on penetrating the canopy of the world.

Ingkath and Irolana barely managed to hold on, but Moos slipped, he hand only just managing to grasp at the side of the surfboard.

Unfortunately, before Moos could get a solid grip, Leonel was forced to swerve violently again, causing Moos to lose whatever hold he had left. In fact, even Ingkath and Irolana couldn't hold on any longer.

The vertical eye of the Oryx pulsed, red veins popping across it as it released its second beam. It even seemed to be preparing a third.

‘Little Blackstar!’

“Yip! Yip!”

The little mink flashed, strong surges of black-green swirling around his body. An upswing of wind slowed the descent of the three, allowing them to fall into the wall Hallis formed unharmed.

The situation instantly became more complicated.

Leonel’s eyes narrowed. He felt that if he let that beam hit him, he would be finished. What good was a Metal Body if it was melted into scrap? The strong destructive character of the blast sent a shiver down his spine.

Yet, even now, he had no idea if this was a unique ability of the Oryx, or if all Oryx had access to this. If it was the latter...

The surrounding forest began to shift and rustle again. The freshmen below could hardly hold in their horror as another Oryx appeared.

Two Oryx, one from the south and the other from the north, pincering the freshmen from both sides.

This second Oryx wielded a crimson halberd, its stature no less imposing. Yet, Leonel was certain that he felt more pressure from it.

At that instant, Leonel suddenly felt like the space around him had been locked.

The first Oryx reacted immediately, its third eye pulsing as yet another beam was sent in Leonel’s direction.

Leonel’s pupils constricted into pinholes.

One's eye pulsed and locked him in place. The other's eye released a devastating attack.

What the hell kind of species were these Oryx? How could they possibly be so powerful?

If this was the case... Valiant Heart was not in just a little bit of trouble. Forget Valiant Heart, even he was facing quite a tall mountain right now.

The crimson beam tore through the skies, bearing down with every intention of splitting Leonel's skill in two.

Chapter 684

Leonel let out a roar.

In a blink, his body was covered in a sparkling black light. The sound of a shattering barrier resounded as he snapped his neck to one side, feeling the searing pain of the crimson beam flying just by his ear.

Leonel breathed heavily, a hint of fear causing his heart to palpitate.

If it wasn't for the fact he had built the Space Element into his Magic Core, allowing him to coat his body in the Force Element and forcefully shatter the Oryx's bind on him, he really might have died just then.

Leonel realized at that moment that these two Oryx's alone were far beyond his means to battle. Hoping to stall them with his terrain advantage was nothing more than a pipe dream. If he wasn't careful, it would be him who would be played with to death.

Whether it was a Lineage Factor or an ability didn't even matter right now. All that did matter was that they could and would kill him if he was the slightest bit careless.

Leonel didn't wait for the Oryx to be surprised that he had managed to break out of their pincer attack.

With swift movements, he nocked the two arrows he had pulled out earlier. He rose into the skies, aiming downward and releasing.

The two arrows spiraled out of each other's path before slamming into one another.

Sparks flew, their trajectories snapping toward completely separate directions, both of which happened to be headed for one of the Oryx each.

The Oryx didn't seem flustered by this in the slightest. One raised their halberd, the other raising their great sword. With swift, unhurried movements, they slashed outward.

However right then.

BANG!

The arrows exploded. It felt as though two red suns had suddenly appeared in the midst of the battlefield. For a moment, the world was dyed in crimson.

The two Oryx roared, all three of their eyes shutting under the assault.

Leonel quickly landed on the top of the rock wall, his feet stamping down. In the blink of an eye, four passageways appeared all around the wall.

"Hurry up!" Leonel shouted.

The freshmen recovered, scrambling to enter the wall.

Leonel brandished his bow. Taking advantage of the temporary blindness of the two Oryx, Leonel began to rain down arrows.

'The fur on their lower half provides a large boost to their defense... Their skin can be vulnerable... Aiming toward patches of skin without bone directly underneath is the most effective...'

Leonel managed to send five arrows toward each Oryx, learning more and more with each strike. But, after a while he noticed that after being hit by his third arrow, the Oryx quickly adapted. Even with their eyes closed, they began to dodge and block.

'Internal Sight...' ρ??∪???????

Leonel sucked in a cold breath. He had to stop treating these Oryx as though they were beasts. Not only did they have intelligence, but they seemed to have access to all the same network of abilities humans did.

Leonel's own bias was thwarting his judgment. He had never interacted with other races of people before, but this should be enough to tell him the universe didn't play favorites. If anything, with how unlucky the Oryx had been in having their home world taken over by humans, the universe would favor them just a touch more.

How ironic. Leonel had just finished repelling an invasion of his own world, just to participate in the invasion of another. What kind of sick place was this Dimensional Verse exactly?

'They're already recovering... Seven seconds exactly... I'd be lucky to get even three if I managed to catch them off guard again...'

Leonel swept his senses over the youth. Though they were weak, if they couldn't cross a mere ten meters with seven seconds, a feat that even an injured mortal could manage, they would have never been admitted to Valiant Heart Mountain.

Even with the jostling and fighting that was inevitable, the freshmen still all managed to cross the barrier in that time.

Leonel shot another arrow, but this one flew right toward Seith.

It landed right at the senior's feet, causing him to jump in a panic.

"Let them in." Leonel said coldly, not even looking back.

Seeing the over 70 freshmen who still remained and glancing toward Hallis who still had Aina's blade to his neck, Seith realized that it was a futile effort.

Before anyone could react, he turned tail and ran into the tunnel. Leonel had said to let everyone in, but that didn't mean he was just going to stand there and accept his fate.

From the way it looked, Leonel would be those two Oryx's first target when they fully recovered. Maybe that would give him enough time to escape through the network of tunnels. He had to hurry.

The freshmen didn't have the time to mind it all, rushing into the tunnel after Seith. The only difference between this time and the last was that some actually looked back toward Leonel.

This was already the second time Leonel had saved them all. If they couldn't at least realize this, they'd be sub-human.

The Dimensional Verse may seem like an endlessly cruel place. But, in some small corners, there would always be kindness. If not, how could people have survived so long against the elements this world always threw at them?

The freshmen threw a look back toward Leonel and dashed into the tunnels, the image of him raining down arrows searing into their minds.

Leonel's jaw remained clenched, his eyes growing colder and colder as he rained his arrows down, doing his best to distract the two.

'They haven't used their abilities ever since their eyes closed. It seems that they're reliant on their third eye being open. But, if I can predict when it will open and react first...'

Leonel's heartbeat grew steadier and steadier, his breathing and his release of his arrows syncing into one.

Aina sent a worried glance up toward Leonel.. Then, gritting her teeth, she too rushed into the tunnel.

Chapter 685

Leonel's feet stamped down hard again. The wall thickened by a factor, and closed tight. He was limited in how far he could control earth away from himself, so this was about the best he could do. But, this much should be enough.

Leonel leapt backward.

Reading his intention, Little Blackstar appeared on Leonel's head just as he casted [Float].

As expected, in a Fifth Dimensional world, the act was even more difficult. Unfortunately, Leonel didn't get a boost because he hadn't added wind to his Magic Core. So, the best he could do was try to slow his fall by a large measure as he continued to fire arrows.

Eventually, Leonel was no longer high enough in the air to fire his shots directly.

Aiming into the sky, Leonel mooned several shots in a single volley. Pulling out another set of six arrows, he nestled two between every finger, sniping his moon shots down from the air.

The 12 arrows rebounded off of each other, one set of six soaring higher into the air and another set of six plunging down like meteors.

Those who could still see Leonel's marksmanship from within the tunnel felt as though they were seeing the work of a magician. It felt like Leonel's marksmanship wasn't limited by anything but his imagination. Was there nothing he couldn't do with a bow?

PENG! PENG! PENG! PENG! PENG! PENG!

The Oryx blocked the first rain, only to find that the arrows that had soared further into the skies had arched back down to aim right for them. It was as though they were being controlled like puppets on the ends of Leonel's fingers.

Leonel landed on the ground, sliding back to the cave entrance.

His pupils moved rapidly scanning the Force Art Seith had left behind. It took him no more than a split second to understand it and point out several flaws. But, he simply didn't have the time to make it perfect.

BANG!

The walls began to quake. Despite being reinforced by Leonel, just a single strike from both Oryx from completely opposing sides caused a gale of cracks to sweep through the whole structure. It looked as though it was a wall of partially cracked eggs rather than one of rock, stone and earth.

Leonel didn't even look back.

He flipped his palm over, retrieving his favorite spear for these tasks. After all, it wasn't just useful for dissecting animal carcasses.

Leonel felt it was unfortunate that the cave entrance itself was too sturdy for an Elite Grenade to work on it, or else he wouldn't have to do all of this.

BANG!

The wall collapsed. If Leonel deemed to look back at this very moment, he would see that the gaze of the great sword wielding Oryx had a straight line of sight to his back. But, as though he couldn't sense a thing, Leonel's arm finished the last of the Force Art at warp speed.

At that moment, Leonel abruptly spun back, shooting another arrow aimed right for the Oryx's eye.

“Enjoy being blinded again!”

The words reached the Oryx’s ears secretly. The moment he understood, his expression changed, his eyes closing and his great sword coming out to block.

Leonel grinned and jumped into the open pit.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

By the time the Oryx realized it was just a normal arrow, the cave entrance had collapsed completely.

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Leonel sprinted down, a rain of rock and rubble collapsing around him and threatening his life.

While Seith had been cautious to not put too much power into the Force Art so as not to destroy the tunnel, Leonel did no such thing. In fact, he put enough power in to collapse at least half of this entire tunnel.

His reasoning was simple. He couldn’t allow the Oryx to dig through with too much ease. With how simple it had been for them to break down his reinforced wall, digging through some rubble was child’s play. Leonel didn’t want to stop them, that was impossible. He just needed to delay them for five minutes, just five minutes would be enough.

Leonel shot down the tunnel, leaving a trail of gold in his wake.

Little Blackstar flashed to the side, skipping through the tunnel even faster than Leonel himself.

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Much further within the underground network, Seith burst into the small clearing that could house about 50. Compared to the freshmen who had followed after him, especially since he had a few seconds of a head start, it was no surprise that he had gotten here so much sooner. Not only was he the only one of them familiar with the network, but he was a white belt.

Plus, his explosive ability helped him with far more than just attack, he could also apply it to his internal Force and his legs, boosting his speed to inhuman levels.

“Seith?”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Seith snapped, wheezing. “That Leonel bastard came back after the Oryx came. I don’t know if the tunnel has collapsed by now or not, but we need to go. There’s a bunch of freshmen on the way here.”

Miya, Yako and the others frowned deeply.

“I left them all far behind, but that masked girl took Hallis hostage. They’ll find their way here even without my guidance!”

The expressions of everyone changed. This was bad. They really hadn’t expected things to develop this quickly.

Their original intention was to leave more than just Seith and Hallis behind, but who would have thought that the Oryx would come so quickly? Miya and Yako had barely gotten here to drop Jaelis and the others off when the commotion began.

What should they do?

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In the tunnels, Senior Lu was running as fast as he could. But, the injury to his hip caused him to be far slower than he usually was. He had gone from being among the best of the freshmen, to lagging behind even the worst.

Though his bone hadn't been injured, the skin and muscles had been. The fact he was moving his leg at all was a testament to just how much he wanted to live.

At that moment, his thoughts weren't even filled with gratitude. And unlike most, he hadn't spared a single look back to Leonel. He just wanted to live.

Senior Lu stumbled and fell, a strong wince coming from him as he struggled to pull himself up, running forward again. But, not long later, he fell once more. This time, however, it wasn't a coincidence.

Senior Lu struggled to look up, only to find a masked and petite young lady standing over him with Hallis' neck being squeezed between her fingers.

"He's too nice to kill you over just a few words, especially since he's using you anyway. But I'm not." Aina said plainly.

"No! Please! I'm so—"

Aina's foot stamped down hard, squashing Senior Lu's head into meat paste.

Lu's fingers twitched, his body seemingly not believing he had fallen even after death.

Chapter 686

Aina turned away from the corpse, not making any attempts to hide it. Rather, she walked away and shook Hallis awake.

Even though she didn't care much about killing, she knew that even in its current state, Valiant Heart Mountain had rules against murdering fellow students. Since she still needed Hallis and couldn't kill him as well, it was better if he didn't see anything, lest it be used against Leonel in the future.

Aina was well aware that she was Leonel's only weakness in this place. If she thought about it, maybe the way Leonel had handled things up until now would have been completely different had she not been there and maybe they wouldn't have been pushed into a corner.

If Leonel heard Aina's thoughts, he would probably laugh. He had terrible luck with organizations. In his opinion, this would happen regardless of whether she was here or not. After all, she hadn't even been with him during his adventures with the Slayer Legion or Camelot.

Thankfully Camelot was now a good ally of Leonel's, but the Slayer Legion remained in a gray zone while even Leonel didn't know whether he would be friends or enemies with Valiant Heart in the future.

Sometimes, Leonel felt that his falling out with organizations was inevitable. When someone as talented as him joined an organization seemingly from nowhere, without the same foundations as the geniuses that they home-grew, maybe his existence itself became contentious.

"... Hm? ... Ah, ah!"

Hallis was shocked awake, feeling his throat being clamped down upon. He tried to gasp, but only managed to suck in half the air he would normally. The sudden change made him feel as though he was suffocating.

He looked down in horror, only to find that it was a petite young woman a half head shorter than him who held him up like this. The fact that she was a freshmen only made the feelings of humiliation all the worse.

Hallis, though, had no choice but to swallow his pride. It only took Aina a single sentence for him to throw away any thoughts of subterfuge.

"I hope you remember that the Oryx are coming after us right now. So, if you don't lead well, I can guarantee that you'll be the first to die."

If Aina had used petty tricks to subdue Hallis, he might be willing to pull some tricks anyway to find a means to escape. But, cold shivers traveled up his spine every time he remembered that bloody ax. He could only obediently do as he was told.

It took Aina only a moment to catch up to the freshmen who were rushing down the tunnels aimlessly.

Shaking her head, she shouted a few words about following her. As for those who went down wrong tunnels and would have to backtrack, they were on their own. If they were quick enough, they might still stand a chance. If not, it had nothing to do with Aina. She wasn't 100% certain on Leonel's plan. But, what she did know was that as long as half of them survived, it would be fine. She wouldn't go out of her way for such two-faced people.

...

Leonel dashed down the tunnels. Despite seeing all the diverging paths, he didn't seem to hesitate in the slightest between which he chose.

At that moment, though, he came to a grinding halt and sighed.

'You left this here on purpose, didn't you?'

Leonel shook his head. Reaching out a palm, he sent a blaze of fire downward, incinerating Senior Lu's corpse to ash. 尸骨无存

After forming his Mage Core, all of Leonel's Elements fused with his body. A happy by-product of this was the Fire Element Leonel could cast gaining a very small Scarlet Star Force character.

Something like incinerating a Fourth Dimensional entity's body to ash like this would have been impossible for him in the past without using his Scarlet Star Force. But now, it was just a casual wave of his palm.

If Leonel's Mage Core progressed enough and his body became a better vessel for flames, he might even be able to make use of his Innate Force Node far ahead of time...

'Hm?'

Leonel was about to walk away when he suddenly found a ring lying on the ground. By its placement, Leonel deduced that it had likely been hanging around Senior Lu's neck.

It shouldn't be surprising that a piece of refined metal survived an incineration, but Leonel had purposely put enough strength into his flame that this shouldn't have been possible. Even a Tier 6 treasure should have been melted completely through even if it wasn't turned to ash.

Leonel bent down and picked up the ring, rolling it between his fingers. Surprisingly, it didn't seem to be a spatial ring. At the very least, Leonel's probes didn't find a hidden space within.

However, what his Internal Sight did find were countless small etchings he couldn't perceive with his eyes nor his touch.

The instant Leonel noticed this, he was reminded of his basement. His father had placed such small etchings on the door handle as a small test before he entered. This was only the second time Leonel was seeing such a method...

Was it just a coincidence? Or was this ring on the level of what his father would find fascinating?

Leonel definitely decided that he should ask the dictionary about this, but now obviously wasn't the time. He didn't think that this Senior Lu would ever have something so interesting on him.

...

At that moment, the very face-off the seniors had wanted to avoid was occurring.

Aina stood with an unconscious Hallis in one arm and her ax in the other. To her back, there were over 20 freshmen, and the number was still steadily growing.

On the other side, the few seniors who had still not been able to decide what they should do stood. However, their numbers weren't small either. The four watching the cave entrance were just the tip of

the iceberg, in the mining tunnels themselves, they had numbers approaching 30, and that didn't even include the addition of Jaelis, Henorin and Balthorn who had seemingly finally woken up.

It was during this very face-off that Leonel finally caught up. His appearance, though, only made the seniors' expressions turn even more sour.. While for the freshmen, it was the exact opposite.

Chapter 687

Leonel's lip twitched when he saw Hallis being treated like a strung up chicken in Aina's hand. It took all the will power he could muster not to laugh. It really was too much seeing a grown man being treated like this.

However, with how serious the situation was, he still managed to keep his calm. What he was surprised about, though, was the fact that these so-called seniors had actually not left already.

The underground network of mines of this world were impossibly vast. From Leonel's understanding, there were even some mine tunnels that could be followed from one end of the world to another. This was considered to be the special quirk of this world that was more than 90% land.

The vast majority of mine tunnels, though, had a span of a few tens of kilometers. But, this was more than enough for an escape, especially since the Oryx saw in infrared.

Infrared couldn't see through polished, shining and cool surfaces. So, what better place would there be to hide if not a mine of ores? It could be said that as soon as they made it here, they had a better than 70% probability of surviving until morning and making it to the mountain pass.

This was why the actions of the seniors were just that much more selfish.

Though it was true that more people would lead more traces and leave a longer trail to be followed – and, more people would also make hiding far more difficult should it become necessary – even with all of that factored in, there was a still better than 60% probability that they would survive to the end of this.

Still, this only made the fact that these seniors hadn't left yet all the more surprising. How did they get caught up here?

Seeing the looks on their faces, though, Leonel concluded that they definitely didn't mean for this to happen. They had been caught off guard by the timing and speed of everything. To make matters worse, they were still arguing about which path they should be taking and how best to handle the situation.

Some of them thought that hiding was still best. The creatures in these tunnels were no joke and only became worse the further you traveled. Something like trying to find another exit was something they had never tried before and would obviously require traveling quite far into this danger zone.

The opposing side was against hiding. As dangerous as these creatures were, could they be more dangerous than the Oryx? Waiting like sitting ducks and hoping they wouldn't be found was ridiculous, especially since it wasn't like the Oryx would just give up in the morning.

These tunnels were a disadvantage to the Oryx in the night. But, in the morning, it ironically became an advantage to them. It was far better for their hunt to take place in the dim lights of the tunnels as opposed to the bright lights of the sky.

Unfortunately, before they could settle their argument, Aina's speed had caught them completely off guard.

It should have taken a normal freshmen two or three minutes to get here, even if they went all out. Yet, Aina had gotten here barely a minute after Seith and that was even including the time she spent killing Senior Lu.

Leonel grasped the entire situation with a look. Seeing that a stalemate was suddenly at hand, he saw that another opportunity had fallen right into his lap.

His expression darkened. "Why haven't you all left? It can't be that you still plan to deal with us? And you call yourselves seniors?"

Leonel's words placed the freshmen even more on guard.

If they planned on using the freshmen as bait to lure the Oryx away, it would be too difficult for them to resist. If not for Leonel and Aina, even if they outnumbered the seniors, they really didn't stand a chance.

Miya and the others frowned. However, they soon sneered, feeling that they had nothing to fear. Even if Aina and Leonel could beat them one on one, they outnumbered the two of them and the other freshmen were nothing but canon fodder. p??(???????)

"If you dare to follow us, don't blame us for being rude." Miya said coldly.

Leonel's gaze narrowed.

Even those who had sided with hiding knew that it was impossible now. With all these freshmen here, there only chance at survival was to run.

But, the freshmen seemed to take things the hardest. Even up until this point, their so-called seniors still refused to raise a single helping hand. In fact, they would be fools if they didn't realize that the earlier words they had spoken about letting them into the mine was nothing but garbage. They always meant to let them all die from the very beginning.

'I think that's about enough for now.' Leonel thought to himself.

Aina threw Hallis over to them, not flinching as he tumbled to the floor.

A clear line of division was drawn between the freshmen and seniors, the atmosphere not vanishing even after the white belts had disappeared down their own path.

Though the seniors had gone, though, there was no sense of relief amongst the freshmen. The seniors knew everything about the tunnels but they knew next to nothing. Wouldn't they end up walking around aimlessly until they were found by the Oryx and died?

Leonel let the atmosphere stew for a while, keeping a pensive expression on his face.

“How did you catch up to us so fast?”

The sudden voice made Leonel smile. He couldn't help but grab onto Aina's small hand and squeeze it a bit.

“How? I just followed the smell of apple.”

Aina was speechless. “Are you a dog or something?”

Leonel grinned but didn't respond. He had learned long ago that Internal Sight was just an extension of his senses. Whether it be sight, touch or hearing, he could do it all. In the past, he refused to do this because he had been traumatized by some terrible smells. The potency of smelling with your nose versus your Internal Sight were on two completely different levels.

But, luckily, his Aina smelled quite pleasant.

Leonel saw the festering atmosphere of the freshmen and finally felt that it was time.

‘It's been about four and a half minutes since the tunnel collapsed. The Oryx should almost be through. Now is the best time.’

“Alright everyone, I will lead you out.” Leonel said confidently.

What no one expected was for Leonel to actually succeed. Just a few hours later, the group found themselves above ground again. But, this time, right before them all, there was a mountain pass they had been thinking of even in their dreams.

Leonel's gaze flashed with a dangerous light. No one seemed to know how much he had accomplished in just his first mission outing but himself and Aina.. He would quite enjoy watching Hero Peak and its allies crumble bit by bit.

Chapter 688

The freshmen who followed behind Leonel felt as though they were walking into a paradise. After so long without seeing the sky, they realized how much they had taken something so simple for granted. Still, what they were the most shocked about was the fact that they had actually made it out at all.

After the seniors left, many of them had been thrown into the pits of despair. Though Leonel had managed to lead them to the mine itself, following underground tunnels was a completely different animal and there were even many times they thought it was all over.

Yet, Leonel had actually succeeded. And, to make matters even more shocking, despite running into several enemies below, the grenades Leonel had given them were just strong enough to kill them without also bringing the tunnels crumbling down around them.

By this point, many looked toward Leonel's back with hints of worship, even Ingkath and Irolana were no exception.

"Hey! You lot! What the hell are you doing here?!"

Leonel inwardly smiled, thinking that yet another group of King of Ores guards were going to get in their way.

What the group of freshmen following behind Leonel didn't know was that he had been confident in leading them out because he had seen Sarrieth's network of mines. Though that map hadn't had the underground tunnels marked on them, Leonel was able to deduce which might be connected based on the ores they produced and their proximity.

From the very beginning, Leonel knew he would be able to find a path out even if it took some trial and error.

However, for the first time, Leonel was surprised to find that his deduction was wrong. What he found weren't the guards of the King of Ores faction, but rather a group of blue belts who still had their former Peak emblems on their person.

From Leonel's understanding, they were from Loyal Peak. But, after scanning the situation, he realized that it didn't matter much.

The group was now so close to the mountain pass that it was within eyesight. But, compared to the past when there might have been just a few groups travelling up and down the path, it was now flooded with activity.

In truth, the number of people here now was so large that it was surprising that their group was noticed at all. It could only be said that these patrolling seniors were on high alert.

Recovering quickly, Leonel explained the situation.

"We were on a mission when we ran into a pair of Titan Hyena's and their Oryx partners. We were lucky to escape through the mine tunnels and make it here."

As expected, the blue belts didn't seem surprised by the mention of the Oryx. Rather, they were surprised that a group of freshmen actually managed to make it so far.

This alone made the reason for the hustle and bustle of the mountain pass obvious. It seemed that the news of Oryx activity had finally made it back to the organization.

The reason the seniors were shocked was because many had already signed off all the freshmen in the area to death after receiving reports of where the Oryx had targeted. Never did they imagine that not only would some survive, but that there would actually be so many of them.

The blue belt at the helm took a deep breath.

"Since that's the case, it will likely be necessary for you to answer some questions about your experiences."

Leonel nodded. "Understood."

“My name is Garlando, I’ll take you all to be processed. We’ve got some new procedures now so bear with it, please.”

Leonel looked back at the group and nodded. ¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶

Garlando was a bit surprised to find that every single one of these freshmen was looking toward Leonel as though to seek approval. Was his word as a senior not enough? What was going on here exactly?

Shaking his head, Garlando didn’t have the time to mind this. These freshmen were the first to come back after having contact with the Oryx. If not for this, how could he be so polite to a group of black belts?

Even as Garlando shrank to his own thoughts, Leonel had also done the same.

‘There’s definitely more security issues to deal with in an era of abilities, their caution makes sense. Who knows if one of the Oryx awakened a disguising ability or not?’

The group was quickly led away, having no idea the kind of commotion their returns would cause.

...

Leonel was separated from the group. In fact, they all were. It wouldn’t be much of an interrogation if they were all kept together.

Still, Leonel wasn’t very worried. He sat silently, a light smile on his face as the dim lights of the interrogation tent flickered. His mind, finally free from having to account for the safety of over 70 individuals, began to work on other matters. As far as he was concerned, they could take their time.

Leonel’s mind focused on his Mage Core.

‘If it wasn’t for you, I’d probably be dead right now, hm?’

Leonel shook his head. That close call with death was still fresh in his mind. Sometimes his infallible memory was a good thing. But, in regards to things like this, it definitely wasn't.

What if the Oryx's ability was like Little Nana's and not space based? Would he still have been able to escape? Leonel really didn't want to think about it, but with his speed of thought, he always seemed to circle back to it.

This was the first time in a long time Leonel had felt this way. He gained so much strength day by day, improving in hours what it would take others months to accomplish, so the fear of death had been slowly washed away.

But, this wasn't because he had become braver. It was rather just a confidence in his own strength.

This, however, was most definitely a rude awakening.

Hours later, the flaps of the tent finally moved as three figures walked in.

One was an elder Leonel recognized, that old man who oversaw the freshman exam, the one Apestus called Elder Tobis. As for the other two old men, Leonel didn't recognize them. But, they both wore red belts just like Tobis did.

The three sat down across from Leonel without a word of introduction and got right to it.

“How did you survive?”

Chapter 689

Leonel smiled. “Luck?”

Though Leonel had said this lightly, the elders didn't seem to find it very funny. Even Elder Tobis, one of the few Leonel had seen that weren't so uptight, wasn't very moved.

But, this only made sense. Valiant Heart Mountain was already in a terrible situation even long before the Oryx made such a move. Now they felt as though they were being pincerred from all sides.

For these elders, it must have felt like watching their legacies crumble before them all in real time. How could they be in the mood for jokes?

As much as these elders wanted to believe that so many freshmen could survive, they had already prepared themselves to be wiped out completely. But now, instead of being pleasantly surprised, they were just skeptical. And, after interrogating all of the freshmen about what happened, it all seemed to revolve around this one young man.

Leonel sighed when he saw such a scene.

“I’m a Force Crafter who has a high affinity for metal and whose ability happens to be a sensory type. Finding mines and navigating them is probably what I’m best at.”

Leonel’s reply was straight to the point.

The elders looked toward one another. This matched up with pretty much everything they knew.

The elder who sat to Tobis’ right scanned Leonel up and down, his eyes blazing with a peculiar light.

“Your explanation sounds perfect, but I still have some questions.”

“Mm?” Leonel met this elder’s gaze.

“What happened with your seniors?”

“My seniors?” Leonel sneered. “If you can even call them that. They were directly responsible for several deaths and separated from us after we entered the mine tunnels. In order to avoid the breakout of another fight, we had no choice but to not follow them as they asked.”

“So your seniors abandoned you in a crisis, yet you were still able to leave before them? Despite having to protect more than 70 other freshmen? Does that make sense even to you?”

“Oh? Then what do you think happened?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone took credit for something they had no hand in.” The Elder replied plainly. “It also wouldn’t be the first time some with less than optimal motives used outside help to become more storied and hallowed than they should be.”

“I see. Well, you’re entitled to your opinion, I guess.” Leonel replied. “It would probably be up to you, then, to prove that I colluded with the Oryx to leave safely. If that’s all, I’ll be leaving now.”

Leonel stood and stretched his back, feeling a satisfying crack.

“Did we say you could leave?”

“Nope, you didn’t.”

Leonel waved goodbye and walked out of the tent.

“That snot-nosed brat!” Heinla grit his teeth.

“Alright, alright.” Elder Tobis stopped the elder before he could blow his top. “We have certain rules we need to follow too, Heinla.”

Tobis could tell that Leonel lost patience almost as soon as the line of questioning began. ¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶¶

The truth was that Heinla had an excellent interrogation ability. But, in order to hide this truth, he often asked questions he didn’t need to. Somehow, Leonel had seen right through this and knew that the main bulk of the interrogation was complete.

This alone proved two things: one that Leonel's ability was indeed sensory and two that it was even powerful enough to see through elders on their level.

After that point, Leonel truly didn't have anything left to prove. Though his leaving was a bit rude, wasn't treating him like a traitor when they mostly confirmed that he wasn't also rude? Especially since Leonel had to put his life on the line to gain the results he had?

"Fine, fine! These brats are getting worse and worse every generation. I can't stand any of them."
Heinla snapped.

Despite his words, he didn't seem intent on going to make trouble for Leonel.

Tobis smiled bitterly. "We're getting old. It's best that we just let the younger generation take over now."

"That Raylion brat is too full of himself, and now it's getting contagious. He didn't even care for the opinions of any of us old timers before he flipped years of foundations on its head. Now look at the fucking result?"

"At any other time, would there have been so many freshmen out doing missions? If it wasn't for the rule changes, they wouldn't have been in the line of danger at all!"

"Fuck, we should interrogate that Raylion little brat too and see if he's the one colluding with those foul smelling bastards."

The third elder, who had remained silent until now, chuckled.

"Alright, alright. We should be happy that he cut things short, there's something far more important to turn our attention to."

The elders all became serious at once.

“That’s right.” Tobis’ gaze sharpened. “Of the more than 30 freshmen who died on their journey here, half of them were actually killed by their fellow seniors. The punishment must be swift and harsh. In these times, if we aren’t united, we are finished.”

The two elders remained silent. Clearly, they were all in agreement.

At that moment, the flaps opened to reveal a familiar blue belt youth.

“Elders, there’s movement. The seniors you were looking for just entered the mountain pass. But, of the more than 30 of them there were, only about 10 remain.”

Elder Heinla practically growled out his next words.

“Arrest them all.”

...

Leonel stepped onto the mountain pass to find a sight that left him pleasantly surprised. At first, he had thought that only Aina would be waiting for him after so long. But, to his surprise, all more than 70 of the freshmen were also waiting.

The moment the youths laid eyes on Leonel, they sighed a collective breath of relief. Though they didn’t say anything, the gratitude in their eyes was clear.

Leonel couldn’t help but smile. It had been a long time since he felt such a feeling, he had almost forgotten how good it was.

...

Valiant Heart Mountain was on high alert. The sudden attack of the Oryx turned out to not just be restricted to their secret deployment into the deep regions of the organization. Not only had they done this, but the Oryx Tribe simultaneously launched an all out offensive on the frontlines, reaping even the lives of some blue belt seniors.

The territory between Valiant Heart and the Oryx Tribe had always been a contentious region, making it one of the most dangerous places to accept a mission, though it likewise had the best rewards. However, it hadn't been this bad in a very long time.

According to the experts of Valiant Heart, it seemed that the Oryx had sensed their weak and vulnerable position and began to counter. At least that was what they believed.

However, Leonel was of a differing opinion. He believed that even if Valiant Heart was in its peak state, this would still happen. The Oryx had been gathering up momentum for a long time and their period of Hyper Evolution was finally reaching a tipping point.

It could only be said that Valiant Heart had terrible luck.

...

Not long after separating with the freshmen, Leonel and Aina headed toward Valiant Hall to hand in their missions. With his planning, Leonel wouldn't allow such a 'small' speed bump to disrupt his goals.

Over the course of the next year or so, he had to be perfect, not giving outsiders any angle of attack. With this meant that even if he was being hunted down by Oryx, he still had to complete all the missions he had accepted.

Surprisingly, at least in this case, it was easier than it seemed to be. With the frenzied nature of the beasts, clearing them out became easier only because they were also easier to find in such a state. Thanks to this, the couple managed to hit their quotas with ease.

There was no surprise that the students working as receptionists for the revamped Valiant Hall were in shock. But, without a choice, they could only hand over the merits Leonel had earned.

...

“All that work for just 2000 merits.” Leonel sighed.

Though it had taken him a month of work to earn just over 10000 merits before, whereas this was just a matter of three days, one had to consider that Leonel had yet to sell all of the Crafts he made during that month. Had he, he would have been drowning in merits by now. But, he had Raylion to thank for the reason he wasn't.

Aina smiled and shook her head. Leonel was acting even now and she found it very amusing. She hadn't known that he could get so engrossed in a role like this.

Even after crippling King of Ores faction like he just had, and even having them arrested to be tried and punished, he still had the cheek to complain. He was definitely becoming more and more of an evil villain.

“Look at you,” Leonel pouted, “Laughing at my pain. Where's the moral support?”

“You can find it the same place you picked up this shamelessness.”

“Yip! Yip!” Little Blackstar called out in agreement.

Leonel burst into a fit of laughter. He really was in a good mood. He wondered what kind of face Sarrieth would have when he realized what happened. It took everything in him not to walk around with a grin as wide as the gap between his ears. ρ??∪???????

“Since that's out of the way, what say you we become white belts? I'm a bit tired of this color, don't you think? It's lacking in fashion.”

Aina rolled her eyes. She would never understand Leonel's fascination with cool clothing. If it was up to her, she'd wear the same military uniform everyday. She didn't like Valiant Heart's uniform very much at all, it left her feeling too exposed.

“Okay.”

Still, she agreed. If not for Leonel, she would have promoted long ago. But, after seeing the haul he got from his patience, she couldn't be too mad at it.

The couple made their way deeper into Valiant Hall.

In the past, white belt exams would take place in one's individual Peaks. However, with the advent of the new system, it all took place with Valiant Hall as a central hub. Now, the Peaks were basically just training centers one had to exchange merits to use.

Unsurprisingly, Hero Peak had the most expensive training facilities. But, Leonel didn't expect anything different from them.

“Hello, we'd like to take the white belt exam.”

The exams took place on the second floor of Valiant Hall so it hadn't taken the couple long to reach this place. There were a sparse few black belts hanging around, seemingly waiting for their exams as well.

A man with a dead look in his eyes looked upward.

“Alright.” He replied blandly. “The exam will begin in 10 minutes.”

Leonel and Aina accepted their plaques and registered themselves. The man with the dead look gave them a weird expression when he noticed that they had been here for less than two months. Were they only here to get humiliated?

“Please note that it is only possible to take the white belt exam once every six months. If you fail now, you have no choice but to wait.”

Leonel and Aina nodded, not taking this advice very seriously. Toward this, the man could only shake his head and go back to staring into space. He had already said more than he usually did in a whole week.

“Aina?”

The voice interrupted the couple before they could even find a place to sit.

Leonel looked up to find a group of four walking before them, three of which were men and the last of which was a woman. The woman especially caught Leonel’s attention not because she was beautiful, but rather because she had an odd nose shaped contraption over her own.

It didn’t take long for Leonel to notice that their belts still held the Hero Peak emblem. By then, it was easy for him to deduce how they might have known Aina.

But, he really couldn’t understand why they were looking at him like he was some sort of zoo animal. He was only holding his girlfriend’s hand, did he do anything worth such a reaction?