

Chapter 165: Epitaph

“We are guardians, but also a bunch of miserable wretches that are constantly fighting against threats and madness.”

Dunn’s words echoed throughout Old Neil’s house. They reverberated across the corroded floor, the walls, and ceiling, as well as within Klein’s mind and soul.

He’d never had a stronger impression of that sentence than the one he had now.

He felt that he wouldn’t forget this feeling for as long as he lived, even if he were to return to Earth.

Amidst the still atmosphere, Dunn walked towards Old Neil’s “corpse” and knelt down. He took out a white handkerchief from the pocket of his trench coat and covered it over the dark red, crystalline eyeball which looked pained.

At this moment, Klein noticed that the keys of the piano had stopped moving. A faint, translucent figure appeared.

This... Klein, who had activated his Spirit Vision before entering the house, froze.

He hadn’t noticed this strange “soul” until now!

Was it because he was distracted by Old Neil, or was it due to Old Neil’s abilities after he lost control? Klein saw the formless figure evaporate quickly, vanishing before his very eyes. He had a faint

idea of what was going on.

Suppressing the heavy feeling in his heart, he heard the Captain give an order, "Search Old Neil's house carefully for possible clues."

"Alright." When Klein spoke, it took him a minute to recognize his own voice. His voice was raspy and deep as if he had the flu.

"Alright," Royale also replied.

The condition of her voice is about the same as mine... It's like our nostrils are blocked... Klein looked at his female teammate, who typically didn't have much of an expression. It was as if he was knowing her for the first time.

Placing his cane on an umbrella rack near the door, he made his way around Sealed Artifact 3-0611. He took heavy steps into the living room and up to the second floor. He then searched every room for possible clues.

Old Neil employed someone to clean the rooms regularly, so the rooms weren't as messy as one would expect of a bachelor. Everything was in order as if there was a female presence in the house.

Half an hour later, Klein found a few handwritten notes on a bookshelf in Old Neil's room. The notes recorded a weird, mysterious ritual:

"Alchemical Life.

“The materials required include: 100ml of spring water from the Spring of Elves (Golden Spring on Sonia Island), 50 grams of Star Crystal, half a pound of pure gold, 5 grams of phlogiston, 30 grams of red iron... And a large quantity of fresh blood from living people.”

Old Neil annotated beneath the part about fresh blood from the living.

“I can consider drawing my own blood, accumulating it little by little and preserve it using ritualistic magic.”

I can consider drawing my own... Klein closed his eyes and crushed the notes.

...

On Thursday morning at nine, the time of the moon. Raphael Cemetery.

Klein was wearing his black formal suit and holding onto his cane. He stood silently in a corner of the cemetery.

He had stuffed a neat white handkerchief in his breast pocket and was holding onto a Slumber flower.

Dunn, Frye, Leonard, and Kenley were carrying a black coffin that stored Old Neil's corpse. They slowly walked to the front of the tombstone and silently lowered it into the grave.

As she saw the brown soil being tossed into the grave, Rozanne, who was wearing a black dress and a white flower in her hair,

wept.

“Can someone tell me if this is all happening for real?

“Why did he lose control, why did he consume the potion, why did he become a Beyonder, why must there be wraiths and monsters, why is there no safer way? Why, why, why...”

Klein silently listened on until Old Neil’s coffin was completely buried in the soil; until all signs that he existed were buried deep within the earth.

“May the Goddess bless you.” He drew a crimson moon in front of his chest, then took a few steps forward and placed the Slumber flower in front of the tomb.

“May the Goddess bless you.” Dunn, Frye, and the others tapped at their chests in a clockwise fashion.

Klein looked up, straightened his back, and saw the black and white photograph on the tombstone.

Old Neil was wearing his classic black hat; his white hair was peeking out around the edges. The wrinkles beside his eyes and mouth were deep, his dark red eyes a little turbid.

He was so peaceful, no longer feeling grief, pain, or fear.

There was an epitaph carved underneath the photograph. It came from the contents of the last entry in Old Neil’s diary: “If I cannot save her, then I shall accompany her.”

The morning breeze blew gently. The silence and emptiness of the Raphael Cemetery hung over everyone.

...

In the afternoon, Klein took a form signed by the Captain to the armory.

He opened the half-closed door and saw Bredt with a thick, black beard behind the table.

Klein froze visibly before handing the form over.

“Fifty rounds of ordinary bullets.”

During his request, he glanced at the tin can on the table. He felt as though he could smell the fragrance of the hand-ground coffee and hear the cheeky words in his ears, “But why must you wait till you have spare cash? You can apply to Dunn and get him to approve of the expenses!”

...

Bredt noticed Klein’s expression and sighed.

“I can understand what you’re feeling right now. I, myself, cannot believe that Old Neil would leave us like that. Sometimes, I even feel as though this is a dream conjured by the Captain.”

“Perhaps this is the destiny of many Nighthawks,” Klein replied with a bitter smile.

After this incident, he felt much more disappointment and hatred toward the upper echelons of the Church for keeping the “acting method” a secret.

“Let’s hope that there will be fewer such tragedies, may the Goddess bless us.” Bredt drew a crimson moon in front of his chest. He took the application form and walked into the armory.

...

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The smell of gunpowder filled the air. Klein vented his frustrations onto the target he was shooting at until he finished shooting the bullets that he had requested. He then collected himself and took a public carriage to Gawain’s house.

He completed sets upon sets of exercises as if he was torturing himself, until Gawain told him to stop.

“Combat practice isn’t there for you to harm yourself.” Gawain looked at Klein with his turbid green eyes.

“I’m sorry, Teacher. I’m a little down today.” Klein exhaled and attempted to explain.

“What happened?” Gawain asked without a ripple of emotion.

Klein thought for a moment, then gave a simple reply, “A friend of mine passed away suddenly.”

Gawain was silent for a few seconds. He stroked his blond mustache and said with a fleeting voice, "I once lost 325 friends in the span of five minutes, amongst them were 10 that I could trust with my life."

Klein sighed in realization. "That is the cruelty of war."

Gawain shot a glance at him and let out a self-deprecating laugh.

"The cruelest thing of all is the fact that I can never exact revenge for them. I can never fulfill their dreams, and the answer eludes me forever.

"As for you, you still have such a chance. Even though I don't exactly know what happened, I know that you're still young. You still have many opportunities."

Klein was silent for a moment. He took in a breath and collected himself.

"Thank you, Teacher."

Gawain nodded and said without any expression, "Take a ten-minute break, then do ten more sets of the exercises you were doing just now."

"..." Klein was momentarily unsure what expression he should show.

...

Friday morning, in the recreation room of the Nighthawks.

Klein, Seeka Tron, and Frye were seated around the round table, but they weren't playing cards. One of them was flipping through newspapers, the other was looking out the oriel windows in a daze, and the last was holding onto a pen, wanting to write something but failing to do so.

The room was quiet. No one spoke, and no one joked around. The atmosphere was heavy.

Phew... Klein exhaled. He lowered his newspaper and planned to focus on reading the materials he had found.

At that moment, Dunn Smith knocked and entered the room. He looked around before saying, "Klein, come out for a moment."

What happened? Klein, who had a premonition of what was happening, stood up and made his way out of the recreation room.

Dunn stood at the entrance of the stairway leading to the basement. He turned and looked at Klein.

"The person that the Holy Cathedral sent is here."

The person examining me is here? Klein's nerves tensed.