# 1 - Drug Trafficking

Cover View

“You fucking bastard!”

A voice so loud it felt like it could shatter eardrums erupted from the man's mouth. His face flushed with rage as he swung his fist at Asel.

With a dull thud, Asel's head snapped to the side. His disoriented body crashed into the muddy ground, and he tasted the bitter flavor of blood from a torn inside of his mouth.

Though he had been struck on the cheek, it felt as if his jaw had twisted, and the world spun around him. His head felt strange.

No, perhaps it wasn't just because he had been hit.

Asel shifted his blurred vision to the pile of white powder that lay beside him, now scattered on the ground.

A drug that induces hallucinations similar to reality and causes Magic Amplification. It was far inferior to what the nobles enjoyed, but in this impoverished area, it was hard to come by and quite expensive.

And it was also something Asel had dropped while transporting it. Right in front of the person who had ordered the delivery.

Of course, it was the man's fault. If he hadn't shoved Asel for being late with the delivery, the drugs wouldn't have spilled into the muddy ground and become unusable. But that didn't matter to the man.

“Do you even know how expensive this is?! You fucking brat!!”

The man shouted as he stomped on the fallen Asel. With each kick of his heavy foot, Asel felt his breath being choked out of him. But the pain wasn't that severe. It was probably due to the accidental ingestion of the spilled drugs.

“......”

Asel narrowed his eyes, feeling the faint pain and discomfort in his body. Blood flowed from the gaps in his closed teeth, but all his nerves were focused on the hallucinations caused by the drugs.

A place called Earth. The image of a man born in South Korea, raised by ordinary parents, living an ordinary life unfolded before him. The life of a young man that felt more like a dream than a hallucination was deeply etched in Asel's mind.

Instead of a torn, moldy rag, he was covered with a warm blanket, sleeping on a bed. He complained about hating food he would never be able to eat in his lifetime, laughing and chatting with people of a similar age.

“Die, you fucking bastard! Just die!”

-What do you want to eat?

Voices from reality and hallucination echoed simultaneously.

One side of his vision was red. It seemed blood from his head had gotten into his eye. But the hallucination remained vivid. It flowed quickly, yet everything felt as clear as if he had experienced it himself.

Then, a soft sound.

“......”

It rained in the hallucination. At the same time, droplets fell on his cheek. The young man in the hallucination opened an umbrella. Meanwhile, the real Asel...

“Asel!”

As a familiar voice rang out, the hallucination vanished.

Asel shifted his blurred vision toward the source of the voice. His only blood relative, Evelyn, was rushing toward him in a panic.

Now that he thought about it, this delivery area was near their home. It seemed she had guessed what was happening from the man's voice and rushed out.

-Rumble!

The sky flashed, and soon after, thunder rumbled. The world was momentarily bathed in blue light. The thin rain began to intensify.

“Stop it!”

As Asel stared at the blue lightning flashing through the dark clouds, Evelyn had already reached the man and was pounding on his back with her small hands, shouting loudly.

“Stop it, you bastard! Don’t hit my brother!”

“Ha! Yeah, you vermin. I was already having a bad day, so let's just die here. Evelyn, I’ll cut off your arms and legs and sell you to a brothel.”

The man said this as he turned his body toward Evelyn. Fear that could not be hidden settled on Evelyn's face. Seeing this, Asel struggled to lift his immobile body.

The hallucinations had faded, but the pain relief effects still lingered. Asel forced his creaking body to move, picked up a sharp stone lying nearby, and brought all his weight down onto the man's foot.

“Ahhh! You bastard!”

The man contorted his face in agony as he screamed in pain from his crushed foot.

The man's strength suddenly drained away. Acute exhaustion and convulsions from a significant external shock. It was a typical withdrawal symptom of an addict who couldn't get their drugs. Ignoring the curses the man spat out as he fell, Asel limped toward Evelyn.

Before Evelyn could say anything upon seeing him, Asel spoke first.

“Sis, let’s run.”

“What?”

“Let’s run. Quickly!”

Asel frowned and grabbed Evelyn's hand, forcibly pulling her to her feet. Only then did Evelyn understand what Asel meant and began to run in the opposite direction of the fallen man.

“Gasp... Gasp...”

Asel followed her. Fortunately, the man wasn't focusing on kicking them, so they could still escape.

They distanced themselves from the man's shouts until they faded into the background. Asel and Evelyn leaned against a half-broken trash can, breathing heavily. The trash can emitted a foul odor, but both Asel and Evelyn were already so accustomed to such smells that it hardly bothered them.

“Phew... Are you okay?”

After catching their breath, Evelyn looked at Asel's swollen face and asked. Asel was about to say he was fine, but the pain that was increasingly becoming apparent as the effects of the drugs wore off twisted his face. Seeing this reaction, Evelyn's expression turned to one of concern.

“Ah... Does it hurt? Your fingers... some of them are broken.”

“What can I do? It's better than being cut off.”

Asel said this and exhaled deeply.

In the slums, physical injuries were very common. Some voluntarily cut off parts of their bodies to sell, while many were robbed of theirs.

Thinking about it that way, having a few broken fingers was a fortunate outcome. Of course, the injuries weren't limited to just his fingers, but still, he could endure it.

Those who couldn't endure it had already died screaming.

“Want to go see the old lady doctor?”

“If we go there, we'll starve for a week. This delivery was the first in two weeks, remember?”

“But...”

“Enough. We can manage with the painkillers I saved up from before. I'll heal on my own.”

Asel muttered as he spat out the blood pooling in his mouth.

There were hospitals in the slums, but the costs were exorbitant, so if they went for treatment and got medicine, they would have to survive for days on the filthy water pooled on the floor. It was better to just endure with the painkillers he had saved from before.

Asel thought this as he shoved his trembling hands into his worn shirt. Then he grimaced.

“Ah, shit.”

The three painkillers he had kept in his pocket had all turned to powder and were rolling around in his pocket. Some had even melted from the rainwater. It seemed the painkillers had been crushed when he was hit by that man earlier.

But what could he do? He had to take this.

Asel cursed inwardly as he scraped together the sticky, melted powder of the painkillers and poured it into his mouth.

A terrible bitterness coated his tongue. He wanted to neutralize it with some other food, but all that was available here was the filthy muddy water. Asel sighed deeply and staggered to his feet. Evelyn followed suit.

“Let’s go.”

“...Okay.”

Asel and Evelyn began to walk aimlessly, brushing their wet hair aside. The man lived near the entrance of the sewer they had called home, so they couldn't go back there.

That meant they had to find a new place to live. Fortunately, there were a few potential residences they had noted before, so they could focus on checking those out.

-Rumble!!

As they moved, the sky brightened, and a delayed rumble of thunder rolled in low.

“......”

Asel briefly glanced at the writhing clouds before moving on.

The year when Evelyn was ten and Asel was nine. Their parents, who were usually obsessed with devil worship, planned to use their children as sacrifices for a devil summoning ritual.

In other words, they were to be living sacrifices. A ritual where their bellies would be cut open while still alive, and their organs and hearts extracted.

Realizing this, Evelyn and Asel left home the night before the ritual and settled in a slum far from their parents.

Fortunately, their parents did not seem to search for them. Instead, a week later, the two discovered a newspaper reporting a large-scale death incident and an attempted devil summoning ritual in their former village.

Three years passed like that. Evelyn turned thirteen, and Asel turned twelve.

The two began working to survive in the slums.

Evelyn got a job at a contraceptive factory. She made cheap condoms from the remains of animals after slaughter.

When she first started working, she spent the whole day gagging and was beaten by other employees. Now, she could make the tools with her eyes closed.

“Here’s your pay for the day.”

The factory where Evelyn worked paid daily wages. Even so, it was barely enough to buy a single piece of fruit in the city.

But every time Evelyn received money, she smiled. Sometimes, the factory owner, who had anger management issues, would slap her for smiling, but the next day, he would apologize and give her a little more money. Though it wasn't much.

In contrast to Evelyn, who did legal work but earned little, Asel did illegal work that paid well.

A drug courier.

A job that made one an easy target for those after drugs and often led to being beaten to death by severe addicts.

Moreover, the Magic Amplification effect of the drugs was popular among twisted wizards, and it was common for drug-dependent mad wizards to be kidnapped. This was why Evelyn had tried to dissuade Asel the moment she heard what he did.

But Asel didn't listen to Evelyn.

No matter how trashy the slums were, money was ultimately important to the powerless. Evelyn had shouted at Asel to quit several times when he returned injured, but seeing him pull out a few coins with a strained smile, she eventually fell silent.

Time passed like that. Asel had become a well-known drug courier, and Evelyn had become a respected worker at the factory.

They earned more money, but it was like grains of sand that disappeared after buying a few painkillers. Life was still impoverished.

The new residence they found was also in poor condition.

A house abandoned by its owner, crawling with rats and insects, filled with foul odors. Maggots crawled out from the moldy walls. The corpse of the house's former owner, left in the kitchen, had long since become a nest for insects.

They couldn't even clean it up. The body, melted by drugs and fused with the floor, would remain there until it was completely burned away, turning to bones.

Still, it was fortunate to have a roof and walls to shield them from the rain and wind.

Thinking it over, living in a shack with a corpse was better than a gaping sewer. Asel thought this as he tossed a log full of insects into the fire.

It was a piece of wood he had torn from the wall.

“Cough, cough.”

At that moment, Evelyn, who had been in the kitchen, walked out. Seeing the blazing fire, she wrapped the cloth around her shoulder and approached the flames. Asel chuckled at the sight.

“Cold?”

“Yeah... It's been cold every day lately. I keep coughing, and my chest feels tight.”

“Is it a cold?”

“Seems like it. Ugh, my head and neck hurt too...”

Evelyn said this as she buried her face in her knees. Then, in a mumbling voice, she added,

“Are you okay? We got rained on together.”

“I’m fine. It stings a bit where I’m hurt, but I can endure it.”

“Thank goodness, cough...! Ugh, what is this? I can't even go to work for days...”

“It's fine. We can still buy food with the money we've saved.”

“Is that so...?”

Evelyn replied weakly, sighed, and threw a nearby crawling insect into the flames.

“Nothing has come in, right?”

It was about the drug courier work. Asel didn't feel the need to lie.

“Nothing. I think we need to rest for a while. My body hurts too.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. If you go to work now, the hospital bills will be even higher, right?”

“We can just not go to the hospital.”

“Will you say that when you're dying?”

Evelyn's joke made Asel chuckle. Evelyn smiled back and wrapped herself tighter in the blanket. Then her eyes drooped down.

The chill they felt was growing stronger. It felt like their eyes were burning, and their eyelids kept drooping. Their bodies were cold, but their heads were hot. Each cough brought a stabbing pain in their chest. It felt too severe to be just a simple cold.

But they didn't show it. Evelyn had no intention of worrying Asel. So she forced a smile.

“Got any fun stories?”

“A fun story?”

Asel hummed thoughtfully, beginning to ponder. Then, as if something had come to mind, he looked at Evelyn with a serious expression and said,

“I think I realized my past life.”

“Are you crazy?”

It was a direct response. Asel averted his gaze from Evelyn's cold stare and grumbled.

“I’m serious.”

A few weeks ago, when he had taken drugs and experienced hallucinations.

At that time, he thought it was just a simple hallucination, but now he didn't. Asel was convinced that what he had seen back then was from his past life.

It was an instinctual realm. Even now, quite some time later, he hadn't forgotten a single detail of what he had seen back then.

But Evelyn didn't believe Asel's words. Anyone would have done the same.

She wasn't some saint blessed by a god. What past life? Evelyn poked her brother's forehead with her finger and stood up.

“I’m tired, so I’m going to sleep first. You should sleep too.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

“Yeah, you too.”

Evelyn lightly kissed Asel on the forehead and found a corner to lie down. Asel watched her for a moment before continuing to toss logs into the fire, lost in thought.

‘I realized my past life, but it doesn’t seem like anything has changed.’

His life in the past. He felt and saw those things vaguely, but there was no immediate change.

His self hadn't wavered, nor had he been consumed by the memories of his past life. The only change he could think of was that he felt a bit smarter. Even that could just be an illusion.

“......Sigh.”

As he continued his thoughts, Asel let out a deep sigh and stopped thinking.

It was a futile worry that wouldn't yield any answers. After all, the memories of his past life weren't clear. Many parts were lost, and the overall flow felt strange. It felt like watching a play.

In any case, it wouldn't be of much help in his current life. After shaking off those thoughts, Asel covered himself with the cloth he had thrown nearby and lay down.

The fire would extinguish itself. It was a flame fed by rotten wood, and it often went out quickly if logs weren't added regularly. Ignoring the fire burning beside him, Asel soon fell asleep.

The next day.

As expected, the fire had gone out. The weather was sunnier than expected, and his body felt better than the day before.

Asel stretched and approached Evelyn, who was still lying down. He gently shook her body.

“Sis.”

“.......”

There was no response. Asel felt something was wrong and his expression hardened.

“Sis?”

“......”

“Wake up. Sis, just wake up for a moment.”

Still, there was no answer.

Asel, thinking the worst, checked Evelyn's pulse, but it was still there, albeit rough. Her face was flushed, and her forehead felt like it was burning. The symptoms were too severe to simply be a cold.

“......Ah.”

As Asel's expression began to sour, a name of a disease he had seen in his past life flashed through his mind.

A disease that causes pain in the chest, neck, and head, accompanied by coughing and persistent chills. The same disease Evelyn suffered from in her previous life, bearing an identical appearance.

It was pneumonia.

# 2 - Drug Trafficking

Colds, the flu, and pneumonia have similar symptoms. However, none of them could be taken lightly in the slums.

A simple cold could be naturally healed over time by trusting the immune system, but this also required gambling. There were as many people dying from colds as there were bugs in this place.

The flu and pneumonia were even worse than colds. These terrible diseases were virtually impossible to cure without professional treatment.

Even if miraculously cured, they always left some form of aftereffect. Most commonly, people would limp strangely or have difficulty speaking. Both were common disabilities in the slums.

But even that was a product of a miracle. In most cases, flu or pneumonia patients couldn't overcome the crisis and all died.

Could Evelyn be free from death? Could she miraculously recover without any treatment and without any aftereffects?

Impossible. It was long past the time to believe in such fairy tales. Asel pressed the cold metal against Evelyn's feverish forehead, clenching his teeth.

According to his memories of his past life, pneumonia and the flu were not so serious diseases in that world. Although the mortality rate was quite high, advanced medicine had completely conquered the two diseases, and there was almost no chance of dying if treated in time.

But this place was different.

Was medicine here lacking compared to his past life? That was somewhat true. But it wasn't to the point where they couldn't treat pneumonia or the flu. It might be difficult to cure completely, but if you just got treatment from a doctor in the city, there wouldn't be any major problems.

The problem was that they couldn't even get that treatment.

In the end, money was the problem. The environment was the problem, and the damn reality was the problem. From the moment he left home. No, it was a fact he had felt deeply since he was under his parents' wing. He was just late in realizing it.

"...Asel."

As Asel was struggling with the pain of reality, Evelyn, with her eyes half-open, called his name. Asel's consciousness returned to her tranquil voice.

"Sister! Are you okay? Can you talk?"

"...Asel. Blood."

"...What?"

"Blood... you idiot..."

Evelyn said, wiping Asel's mouth with her finger. Then, bright red blood followed. It was bleeding from his gums being torn because he clenched his teeth too tightly. Asel didn't even notice until Evelyn told him.

"Don't be sick..."

Evelyn wiped the blood on her finger on the blanket and smiled weakly. Asel felt even more emotional at Evelyn's words than at her actions.

"Who are you telling...!"

"I'm okay, Asel... I'm okay... Don't, hng, don't worry about me."

"Bullshit."

Asel immediately dismissed Evelyn's words. He removed the metal that had already become hot and placed another cold metal on Evelyn's forehead.

Evelyn opened her mouth to say something to Asel's actions, but Asel was even faster.

"Wait here. I'll get medicine."

"...Asel."

"Don't die until then. Don't even faint. I'll be back before sunset, so stay conscious until then."

He didn't wait for an answer.

Asel immediately got up and left the rotten shack. The cold winter wind blew as if freezing him to the bone, but Asel moved without hesitation.

He thought about Evelyn.

The only blood relative who took responsibility for him until the end, in place of his parents who were possessed by demons and committed murder and cannibalism. She wasn't naturally healthy, but he still vividly remembered her climbing trees to pick fruit and smiling.

After coming to the slums, he couldn't forget her going to work at the factory every day without rest, unlike himself who rested when there was no work, and always sharing the edible parts whenever she got good food by chance.

How could he just watch such a person die? Because he didn't know when she would die, so he should at least watch her die?

'Bullshit.'

Asel had no intention of doing that. Miracles don't happen just by praying. Something similar to a miracle happens only when you do something. He had never forgotten that rule for a single day since settling in the slums.

Asel forced himself to warm his chilling body and continued walking. His destination was a drug manufacturing factory.

'It's virtually impossible to go to the city and steal medicine.'

The city's security is by no means lax. Even just going near a simple peddler, guards are visible to prevent robbery, so how is it possible to break into a clinic and steal medicine?

Even if he was lucky enough to quietly infiltrate a clinic, there was no way to distinguish pneumonia medicine from flu medicine among the many drugs. Asel had no knowledge of medicine.

So he had to find another way. Almost the only way and one of the things Asel did best in the slums.

"I want to deliver drugs."

He shouted as soon as he entered the factory.

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The drug factory operates more simply than expected.

The factory owner and drug supplier brings in drugs from the outside, some of which are modified and produced. The rest is sold and distributed.

If you ask which is more important, those involved usually choose modification. Selling good quality products by modifying drugs well results in much better sales.

In that respect, the factory Asel came to was considered quite good at modification, even within the slums. This was information he could know because he had a lot of experience working as a delivery person here.

"So."

Asel sat on the chair and focused on the voice coming from across from him. A middle-aged man with a sharp impression stared down at him and opened his mouth.

"You want to do the highest-paying delivery?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"I need money urgently. I need to buy medicine."

"Medicine..."

The man, the factory owner, muttered, leaning back on the sofa. Then he chuckled and took a sip of coffee.

"Do you know how strange it is that I'm having a one-on-one conversation with you like this?"

"...I know."

Just a few weeks ago, when Asel spilled the drugs and they all became powder worse than sand. The supplier of the drugs he was transporting at that time was the factory owner in front of him. Asel not only ruined that delivery miserably, but also disappeared without a word for several days.

Because of that, the factory owner lost a customer who regularly ordered drugs, and his credibility with customers was slightly reduced. He suffered a small but not negligible loss.

But suddenly he appears and asks for a high-paying delivery job.

"Don't you think there's a limit to how shameless you can be?"

"......"

"To be honest, I want to kill you right now and sell your organs on the black market. There are quite a few enthusiasts for kids' organs. Whether they're simple collectors or demon worshippers, either way I can get a good price."

It was a creepy remark. But Asel didn't tremble. He knew that saying that was the same as declaring that he wouldn't do it. The factory owner also knew that Asel was quite clever, so instead of continuing to scare him, he quickly moved on to another story.

"You need to buy medicine."

"......Yes."

"Is it expensive medicine?"

"I don't know. I can't know the market price. But it's a common medicine."

"About five silver coins then. That's enough money to eat and play for more than half a year in this junkyard."

"......"

"It just so happens that a job with a similar reward has come in. The problem is that no one wants to do it."

It was good news and bad news. It was good that the request remained, but the reason it remained was the problem.

No one wants to do it.

That means there is a reason why no one will take the request. A reason that is dangerous enough to risk their lives.

The factory owner immediately explained the reason without hesitation.

"It's a request from a Corpse Sorcerer."

"........A Corpse Sorcerer, you say?"

"Yes."

The factory owner nodded. On the other hand, Asel's face began to rot more and more.

Corpse Sorcerer. A magician who handles corpses as the name suggests. Unlike ordinary magicians, they are peculiar magicians who do not convert Mana into Magic power, but change it into Foul energy to manifest Formulas. Because of that representative characteristic, the perception of them was not very good.

In fact, they are not so different from their perception. For them, intelligent beings are nothing more than resources for magic, and ethics or emotions are just useless by-products that are discarded at the same time as learning magic.

What they value is the ritual and transcendence achieved through corpses. The thoughts left by the dead. And only personal achievement.

"What they want is five boxes of drugs. They've already paid the deposit here, and they said they'll give an additional payment when they hand over the goods."

"......"

"The value of the drugs is five gold coins. The reward for the delivery person is seven silver coins. More money than you want."

The factory owner smiled. Asel bit his lip for a moment, then asked in a low voice.

"...There seems to be a price for arranging the request. Otherwise, no matter how bad the request is, you wouldn't offer it to someone as untrustworthy as me."

"Haha! You're smart after all. If you were born in a noble family, you would have become something?"

The factory owner said, leaning his upper body towards Asel.

"I'll get straight to the point. In exchange for entrusting the request, I want to include you in my organization. Including your sister, of course."

"......"

"I'm looking at you quite favorably. Not only is your head working well for your age, but your memory is also good. It's a problem that you ran away once, but as long as I have Evelyn as a hostage, you won't be able to run away as you please. Huh?"

Asel kept his mouth shut. Whether he did or not, the factory owner continued, stretching his lips wide.

"As time goes by, your head will become more brilliant. I've seen quite a few guys like that. Those who show talent from a young age always make a name for themselves later. I think you're someone who can do that too. I've never seen a guy who delivers by hitting the map of the slums in his head as it is, and memorizes the explanation of the drugs he's transporting as soon as he hears it."

"......That's an overestimation."

"That's for me to judge."

The factory owner moistened his sore throat with coffee because he had said a lot, and said, looking down at Asel.

"So, will you do it?"

The answer was already decided.

# 3 - The Corpse Sorcerer

The cloudy weather finally released its rainwater. Dark clouds blocked the sunlight, and blue lightning flashed between them.

The heavy rain purified the blood flowing through the slums, but also accelerated decay. Asel tried to ignore the smell of corpses wafting from the alleyways as he brushed his rain-soaked hair back and continued walking.

"...Hah."

He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. The handwriting was difficult to make out, but Asel knew it indicated an address.

It was a strange skill to have in the slums. In a place overflowing with illiteracy, the value of someone who could read was exceptionally high. While there were plenty of people good with their bodies in the slums, those with sharp minds were rare. That's why Asel received more money and more requests than others.

"..."

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Asel ducked under a suitable tent and examined the address written on the paper in detail.

'First drainage ditch, fifth shack.'

It was a somewhat confusing address, but for someone who had memorized the entire map of the slums, it wasn't a big problem.

Asel quickly tucked the paper away and moved carefully to keep the drugs from getting wet. Fortunately, the backpack given by the factory owner was coated with waterproof material, so there was no need to worry about rainwater seeping in.

-Rumble!

Just as he was about to leave the tent, the sky roared fiercely with a thunderclap. Asel's eyes sparkled as he saw blue lightning strike somewhere.

Ever since childhood, when he witnessed lightning strike and burn trees right in front of him, Asel had been fascinated by the power and mystery of lightning. He deeply understood why the ancients called lightning divine punishment.

If given the chance, he wanted to see falling lightning again. But just because he wanted to see it didn't mean he could, and lightning wasn't the important thing right now.

'I need to complete the request as quickly as possible, buy medicine, and return home. That's how I can save my sister.'

Thinking this, Asel adjusted his backpack. Though the backpack filled with five packets of drugs weighed heavily on his shoulders, he paid no mind and slipped into a deserted alleyway.

It was the shortest route to the first drainage ditch. Though it was a path no one took due to the decaying corpses and putrid puddles, that made it the optimal route for Asel. He wiped the rain from his face and continued on his way.

The thunder seemed especially loud as it followed behind him today.

It was about three hours after leaving the factory when he arrived at the Corpse Sorcerer's residence. It had taken that long just walking without any interruptions.

This was due to the drug factory being located far from the first drainage ditch, and the Corpse Sorcerer's residence being hidden in a particularly difficult place to find.

Is this how all magicians are? He didn't know. Even for Asel, this was his first time delivering drugs to a magician.

There's a saying that all magicians living in the slums are crazy. While slum rumors tend to be exaggerated and need to be taken with a grain of salt, that wasn't the case for rumors about magicians.

Their bizarre actions were all real events that happened in the slums. In the slum where Asel lived, there was even a time when some mad magician kidnapped and killed a large number of homeless people, creating a lingering blood mist that wouldn't dissipate for a while.

If even regular magicians were like that, how insane must a Corpse Sorcerer be?

"...Phew."

Feeling anxious and tense, Asel let out a long breath. Then he swallowed hard and knocked on the door of the Corpse Sorcerer's house.

Like the dilapidated houses elsewhere, the door of the Corpse Sorcerer's house shook with the strange sound characteristic of rotten wood.

"Delivery."

Asel called out as he knocked on the door. But there was no response. All he could hear was the sound of rain hitting the ground and rough thunder. Wondering if his voice hadn't been heard, Asel knocked again.

"Delivery."

"Shut up!"

The answer came from behind. Asel jumped in surprise at the man's harsh shout and quickly turned his head. He saw a pale-faced man wrapped in a black robe.

He was staring down at Asel with bloodshot eyes, breathing heavily.

"I answered, I answered! Why call twice! Why, why, why, why!!!!"

You didn't answer, you bastard.

Asel swallowed those words and managed a strained smile. He slowly moved the backpack from his back to his front. It was an action meant to avoid provoking the person in front of him. Fortunately, it seemed to work, as the man just continued breathing heavily without lunging at Asel to kill him.

"I apologize. I acted carelessly. Would you please forgive me just this once?"

A humble attitude unbefitting his age came naturally to Asel. It was partly due to the social skills he had learned while delivering drugs, and partly due to his mental age maturing as he recalled memories from his past life.

Inwardly impressed by his own handling of the situation, Asel bowed his head even lower.

"I'm a delivery person who came to deliver drugs on Mr. Bruger's orders. Are you Mr. Zervil?"

"Y-yes. That's right. Drugs, drugs, drugs! Give me the drugs quickly. Hurry!"

Zervil jumped up and down in place as if having a seizure, rolling his eyes. His mental state was extremely unstable. These were withdrawal symptoms from not taking drugs for a while.

Demanding money first from someone in such a state would be suicidal.

Moreover, the other party was a magician. Though he hadn't seen him use magic yet, Asel sensed something different about Zervil from others. He wasn't sure what it was, but instead of satisfying his curiosity, Asel quickly took out a packet of drugs from his backpack and handed it to Zervil.

"Drugs, it's drugs! Give them to me, you bastard! They're all mine!!!"

"Here you go."

As if he hadn't heard Asel's words, Zervil immediately snatched the drug packet from Asel's hand, tore it open, and buried his face in it.

The white powder instantly covered his face. It was an absurd way of consuming drugs considering their value, but Asel quietly waited for him to calm down.

"...Hmm."

After a few minutes of licking his lips in place, Zervil's movements suddenly stopped. He neatly gathered his arms and legs that had been flailing wildly, as if he were a normal person, and brushed off the drugs on his robe. Then he clicked his tongue and wiped the drugs from his face.

"It seems I spilled more than I consumed. Perhaps because it's been too long since I last took them."

Unlike before, his voice now carried a sense of deep wisdom. His actions exuded an inexplicable old-fashioned grace, and his slightly displeased face had a noble air about it.

An attitude as if the person had completely changed in an instant. Asel unconsciously swallowed and took a step back at the jarring difference. Only then noticing Asel's presence, Zervil rolled his brown eyes to look at him.

He stared down indifferently at the tense Asel, then smiled and approached him.

"I apologize for that. I can't maintain my sanity unless I'm intoxicated by drugs. I hope you'll forget the disgraceful behavior from just now."

"...What happened? This is my first time meeting you, Mr. Zervil."

"Oh? Haha! What an interesting fellow. I didn't expect such an answer. Are you older than you look?"

Zervil looked at Asel with interest, then bent his knees to meet his eye level. He then took out six gold coins from his pocket and handed them to Asel.

It was one coin more than the original price of the drugs. As Asel opened his mouth to speak, Zervil was quicker.

"Keep one for yourself. A reward for entertaining me."

"...Thank you!"

Asel immediately bowed his head and shouted. He had no intention of refusing.

A whole gold coin. This alone was equivalent to about ten silver coins, a considerable sum. With this much, he could buy medicine for Evelyn and even purchase additional supplies with money left over.

Asel tightly grasped the one gold coin Zervil had given him with both hands and raised his head with a bright expression.

—And then his breath suddenly caught.

"...Hmm?"

Zervil's expression was no different from before. He still had a relaxed smile on his face and was looking at Asel with gentle eyes. But those eyes were different from before.

"Friend. You have an interesting ability?"

There was no sign of life in the brown eyes that had regained vitality after taking the drugs. It felt like facing a dead corpse.

An unknown stench wafted from his nose. At the same time, as soon as he met Zervil's eyes, he heard someone's whispers.

-Save me save me save me save me.

-Even death wasn't an escape? Then why did I have to do that! Why, why!!!

-I want to die I want to be free please release me from here

-I'll kill you I'll tear you apart and kill you for sure.

Explicit pleas, curses, and lamentations of unfathomable depth shook Asel's head. Unable to suppress the sudden urge to vomit, Asel spewed water and gastric juices onto the ground.

"Urgh!"

"Friend. Are you alright?"

Zervil chuckled and stroked Asel's back as he collapsed. Asel leapt to his feet in horror at the corpse-like cold touch. Zervil continued to look up at him with a smiling face.

Trying hard to ignore Zervil's gaze, Asel bowed his head in greeting.

"I-I'm fine. More importantly, I'll be going now. I'll leave the drugs here."

Asel said this and hurriedly turned around.

"Wait a moment, friend."

At that moment, Zervil spoke in a low voice as he stood up. At the same time, Asel's footsteps came to an abrupt halt. Asel instinctively sensed that some power was imbued in that voice. And he realized.

The essence that makes up the world. The miraculous power that was the beginning of everything and caused the advancement of civilization.

Mana was flowing through Zervil's voice, weighing down on Asel's shoulders.

Thud, thud.

Zervil's footsteps drew closer. Asel gritted his teeth and tried to move his body, but it wouldn't budge an inch. Rather, the more he tried to forcibly move, the more he felt a burning sensation in his muscles. His brain also felt like it was being heated to the point of being cooked.

"Shit!"

Due to the pain felt throughout his body, the sensation of his head being cooked, and inexplicable fear and impatience, Asel unknowingly cursed and rolled his eyes around.

It was to see if there was any way to escape. But there was nothing to be seen. Only trash scattered around pitifully guarded its place.

"My, my, you shouldn't swear."

Zervil said in an amused voice. Having already reached in front of Asel, he tapped Asel's stiffened head with his hand.

"Alright. Stay still, friend. I have something to ask you."

"..."

"You, when you made eye contact with me, you heard something strange, didn't you."

"...I didn't hear anything."

It was a lie.

Zervil chuckled and put more strength into the hand tapping Asel's head.

With loud smacking sounds, Asel's head shook violently each time Zervil swung his hand.

"I prefer honest friends."

Zervil said as he stroked Asel's cheek with his other hand. Each time he moved his hand, an eerie energy flowed out.

It was death energy. A power used to handle corpses by refining mana. That terrible energy was slowly rotting and crumbling Asel's cheek. Asel clenched his fists, gritting his teeth at the pain as if his flesh was being burned away.

Regardless, Zervil didn't even pay attention to what Asel was doing and just smiled gently.

"I'll ask one more time. What did you hear?"

"...Nngh, y-yes. I heard something."

"Hmm... How curious. It shouldn't be easy to read the memories of the corpses contained in this body."

Zervil muttered to himself as he tapped Asel's cheek with his hand. The rotting flesh was smashed following his hand movements. Asel's cheek was instantly covered in blood.

"Are you perhaps a magician? No, you don't seem to be. I don't sense any magical power from you."

"..."

"Hmm... But there is a lot of mana floating around you. Are you naturally loved by mana? How high must your affinity be for such a phenomenon to occur? Judging by how you forcibly heard the voices of the corpses that make up this body, your resonance seems good too..."

Zervil muttered, tilting his head. Then, grinning, he looked at Asel with interested eyes.

"Just how talented are you?"

"...This is the first I've heard of it."

"Well, of course. How many people in this dump could recognize your talent? No one but someone like me would know."

Zervil said, shrugging his shoulders. Asel tried his best to avoid Zervil's gaze while racking his brain for a way to survive.

"It would be a waste to let such talent rot away. But I'm not really in a position to take on a disciple either. Hmm... Alright, I've decided. I'll just carve out your heart and brain separately, and examine your mana sensitivity and affinity a bit. I can see it now that I've noticed. The mana going crazy wanting to enter your body. I've never seen mana act up to this degree before."

Zervil gently stroked Asel's head.

"Don't worry. I won't kill you right away. I'm also curious about mana's reaction when I torture you, and when your emotions are in turmoil. Or I could forcibly implant a mana core into your body. It's not in great condition since I forcibly extracted it from a 5th rank magician, but that should be enough, right?"

He casually uttered horrifying words in an amused voice. Asel desperately tried to break free from this restraint and escape, regardless of talent or whatever else.

There was no one visible nearby to call for help. Even if there were, the chances of them helping were slim.

Someone in the slums helping another person without any compensation? That's the kind of story you'd only find in novels. In reality, people are too busy running away to help. They avoid the scene to keep trouble from spreading to themselves.

"...Ugh."

There were no useful objects around either. Even the ubiquitous rusty blades couldn't be found when needed. No, he couldn't move his body in the first place. Whether Zervil intended it or not, the only part Asel could move was his mouth.

The talent Zervil praised was of no help either. Telling someone who has never held a pen that they're good at drawing is pointless - that person doesn't even know how to draw in the first place. They might be able to scribble some lines on paper, but they can't create anything that could be called a "drawing".

It was the same for Asel. Mana sensitivity? Affinity? No matter how much he was told these were excellent, Asel didn't understand the concept of mana itself. He only vaguely knew it was the fundamental power of the world. He had no idea how to utilize or handle it.

A sense of helplessness and fear began to consume his thoughts.

'What should I do? Am I just going to die here?'

Then what about Evelyn? Asel glared at Zervil, who was stroking his chin in contemplation, and gritted his teeth. But there was nothing he could do. No matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn't see any way to survive.

"...Damn it."

Rumble.

Just as Asel cursed, white lightning flashed through the falling rain. As Asel narrowed his eyes at the unfamiliar color of the lightning, he vaguely saw someone's silhouette below where the lightning was flashing.

"..."

It was a woman wearing a huge hat, with snow-white hair flowing down to her waist. She was standing in the middle of the alley, staring intently in this direction.

Her vivid blue eyes sparkled in the light. Her uniquely styled clothing blended seamlessly with the mysterious atmosphere, and white lightning jumping around her was evaporating the falling rain.

It was a scene that didn't feel real. Asel found himself staring at her without realizing it. At the same time, she too was gazing at Asel.

The two people's gazes met in the air, and the woman moved her lips first. Although her voice wasn't audible, Asel could understand what she was saying. Or rather, her words echoed in his head.

[Duck.]

As soon as he recognized the words, Asel's body was forced to the ground.

Word magic, which compelled action through words. The moment Zervil, sensing the lingering echo of that unique magic, regained his senses.

[Discharge Lightning]

A pure white lightning bolt was fired towards Zervil.

# 4 - Fate

Pa-ji-jik!

White light stretched out fiercely, aiming for Zervil's head. Despite the sudden attack, Zervil smiled faintly and formed a hand seal.

[Cadaver Paries]

Crack! With the sound of something collapsing, a wall of corpses rose from the ground. Distorted human faces filled every direction, and a heart embedded in the very center pulsed, scattering blood around the flesh wall. Lightning struck the center, and the wall shattered with a loud noise.

Blood, pus, and pus dripped between the collapsed walls. Zervil watched the filth being washed away by the rain, then raised his head to look at the owner of the lightning.

His face was hidden in the darkness of the alley, but his blue eyes shone clearly. It revealed the identity of the magician.

Even if there were no glowing eyes, Zervil would have recognized the owner of the lightning right away. In the first place, no magician rolling around in this world could not know the name of the continent's only Electromancer. Even a monster who had reached the realm of Archmage.

"It's been a while, The Beginning. Have you been well?"

Zervil said, slightly bowing and placing his hand on his chest. It was the etiquette of the nobility.

Familiar formality flowed through his gestures. But the voice coming from the alley was not so formal.

"Continental target for subjugation."

A woman's high-pitched voice traveled through the air. With that alone, the surrounding thunder grew stronger. Violent and brutal Mana began to slowly occupy the space.

"Corpse Sorcerer Zervil. The bestowed epithet is Corpse Lord."

"Oh, my. For an Archmage to call me by my epithet. I'm honored."

"Single-handedly annihilated the Verom Kingdom, built a fortress by piling up corpses. Killed the envoys of the Holy Kingdom and the Empire who came to visit. Declared a domain around the destroyed kingdom, forming a land where the living cannot enter. Then suddenly disappeared."

"I had my reasons."

Zervil shrugged. From beneath his feet, the heads of corpses slowly rose.

They were grotesquely twisted corpses. Sharp teeth were in place of eyes, and pointed tongues flicked out from mouths that stretched from the jaw to the abdomen.

"Recently, I've been researching methods for refining corpses. This is the result. But in the process of making them, I used up almost all of the kingdom's people, so I'm wandering around to replenish the corpses."

Ignoring Zervil's words, the woman slowly moved towards him. Then her appearance was fully revealed.

An innocent appearance that was more suitable to be called a girl than a woman. But the sense of oppression emanating from her body was by no means at a level to be called a girl. The surrounding air pressed down heavily, and static electricity mixed with moisture stung the skin.

It felt like facing an irresistible monster. Just looking at her, an oppressive feeling that seemed to crush him to death pressed down on his entire body.

But Asel did not take his eyes off her. No, he couldn't take them off. Not because of Zervil's Foul energy, but because of the violent Mana with the nature of lightning, Asel felt something tickling in his chest.

A strange feeling, as if the sensation of his arm, which he had forgotten he had, was reviving. Asel engraved the newly emerging sensation in his mind and stared at the girl with wide eyes.

At that moment, with a crackling sound, lightning sparked around her.

"The large-scale massacre that occurred in the slums of the Empire a year ago. Was that also your doing?"

"It's a waste of breath to say it twice. But since it was done without taking drugs, I don't remember much other than the prostitutes screaming for me to save them."

"I see."

The girl replied, closing her eyes.

More and more branches of lightning were rising around her. At the same time, Foul energy began to flow out of the bodies of the corpses near Zervil. The corpses trembled as the energy exceeded the limit, but Zervil didn't care. Instead, he smiled bitterly and moved his lips.

"More than that, the Magic Federation is amazing. Even if I'm designated as a target for subjugation, they designate an Archmage as a hunter? Are there so few people in the Federation?"

"There was a contract I made a long time ago. I was just trying to get rid of it this time. And..."

The girl said with a small smile.

"Rather than sending other hunters to give you good quality corpses, they needed someone who could handle it properly."

"It's become troublesome. If I had known it would be like this, I should have just pretended to be caught and killed by the last hunter."

Zervil sighed deeply and stretched out his hand to the side. Then a long sword rose from the ground and was caught in his hand.

A sword forged by refining flesh and bones. The peach-colored blade was covered with sticky Foul energy. A demonic sword that would rot the area it touched. Zervil spun the sword around and smiled at the girl.

"You're not going to spare me, are you?"

"Can a Corpse Sorcerer survive even if only the brain remains? If so, I'll spare you."

That was a sufficient answer. Zervil handed the sword he was holding to a knight-like corpse and spread his arms wide. Then he shouted.

"Alright! Then shall I stretch my body for the first time in a while?"

The girl said nothing. Instead, she tilted her head slightly. That simple movement became a single incantation, pouring down on Zervil.

[Chasing Thunder]

Pa-ji-jik!

White lightning moved towards Zervil at a rapid speed. Zervil twisted the joints of his body abnormally to avoid the attack. At that moment, the lightning that had missed changed its course and returned to Zervil.

And struck him directly. Zervil's body was instantly covered in white lightning.

"Gggghhhhh..."

Unintelligible syllables leaked from his mouth. His electrocuted body trembled, and his fingertips turned to ashes and scattered due to the overwhelming thermal energy.

But Zervil, without any sign of pain, contorted his electrocuted face and wore a grotesque smile.

Pu-hwak!

His chest burst open. Blood and flesh spurted out from the gap, and compressed corpses were fired like cannonballs.

[Cadaver Solution]

The compression was released as soon as they were fired. The corpses, which had instantly increased to hundreds, filled the street densely. Asel, who was standing behind Zervil, was fine, but the girl was obscured by the countless corpses that were attacking from all directions, and her appearance could not even be seen.

But her voice was clear.

"Annoying."

The girl looked at them with indifferent eyes and waved her hand.

[Lightning Flash]

Lightning danced along her touch. The rapidly advancing white light burned, crushed, and exploded everything it touched. Every time the lightning moved, blood and flesh splattered and formed puddles of blood on the ground. Even that evaporated the moment the lightning touched it and was washed away by the rain.

"Hoo."

The girl blew out the lightning that had bloomed from her fingertips and turned her head towards Zervil.

Zervil, watching the girl evaporate the blood with lightning, quickly formed a hand seal.

The lightning that had covered his body had long since scattered as afterimages. He pulled up Foul energy and manifested magic.

[Cadaver Brachium]

A giant arm made by weaving corpses was summoned in front of Zervil. The arm, with human faces plastered all over it, moved as if to crush the girl, and the girl held a lightning bolt the size of her palm in her hand and stabbed forward with clumsy movements.

[Severing Thunder]

The short lightning and the giant arm collided.

The result was the victory of the lightning. The white lightning collapsed the arm from the inside, scattering pieces of flesh and blood in all directions.

Jjeo-eong!

A huge noise spread as the arm exploded. Asel frowned unconsciously, and the girl pointed her finger at Zervil. A simple incantation. But the power created in that way was not simple.

[Turbid Thunder]

-Pa-ji-jik!

The sound of lightning sparking was heard from the girl's fingertips. But nothing was fired. Only silence was heavily laid on the street.

However, Zervil hurriedly pulled a corpse with a belly like a pregnant woman in front of him. Immediately, the corpse exploded like a bomb. Zervil, covered in blood and flesh, shouted in a dumbfounded voice.

"Are you kidding me! This is a corpse that only focused on defense! It's not a weak individual that explodes with one magic!"

"What do you want me to do."

The girl replied blandly and spread her palm towards Zervil. A straight form of lightning was ejected from her grasp.

[Thunderclap]

"Let's catch our breath!"

Zervil placed both hands on the ground. The smell of rotten corpses wafted from beneath his feet, and a rotten head the size of a building rose. The head exploded without fail, just like before, the moment it came into contact with the lightning.

Zervil chanted magic amidst the scattering pieces of flesh.

[Suprema Unio]

[Gigas]

The compressed corpses rolling out of Zervil's hand gathered at one point. Then, in an instant, they formed a giant corpse golem. The golem looked down at the girl with eyes dripping with blood, then roared and stomped its feet heavily.

-Uwoooooooo!

"Noisy."

The girl muttered and drew her hand down from above.

[Lightning Flash]

[Mimicry]

[Lightning Strike]

Lightning Strike, classified as high-level magic even within Electrification Art, was manifested from another magic following only its principles. The power was significantly lower, and even the range was incomparably narrow, but it was enough to evaporate the golem whole.

Kwaaaaaang!!

At the same time as the lightning fell, an ear-splitting thunderclap was heard. Asel opened his mouth in awe, forgetting that he had tinnitus in his ears, and Zervil unknowingly let out a hollow laugh.

"That's not something you can kill so easily, really..."

"Is the fooling around over?"

Beyond the golem that had turned to ashes and scattered, the girl said, scattering blue light.

Zervil shrugged and answered, scattering corpses from the hole in his chest.

"Well, not yet."

The small, compressed corpses rose up. The corpses dominated by a high-ranking Corpse Sorcerer were at a level to massacre skilled warriors with their bodies alone.

Moreover, Zervil was the best of the Corpse Sorcerers. Each of the corpses he dominated was comparable to an upper-level expert.

But the girl didn't even blink at the tsunami of corpses that covered her vision. She simply scattered lightning and killed them all, as if it were a nuisance.

A corpse reaching out with a sharp arm evaporated and disappeared from the arm. Dozens of corpses exploded whole every time lightning flashed. Electricity spreading through the rainwater electrocuted and burned the corpses, and a barrage of lightning strikes cleaned the surroundings.

When almost no corpses remained around the girl, she sensed Zervil, who had begun to recover Foul energy, and frowned.

"You weren't planning on doing it properly, were you?"

She stepped on and burst a corpse that was rushing at her and pointed to the three corpses standing as if guarding Zervil next to him and continued.

"The strongest ones aren't even moving, and the magic you're using is just throwing corpses mindlessly. It seems like you're aiming for something."

"You're quick to notice."

Zervil smiled bitterly and filled the torn chest again. He compressed the corpse that was being trampled under his feet and chewed it like candy, then wriggled his mouth with blood dripping from it.

"I was just trying to run away. It's not a big deal. Do you think I'm crazy enough to fight Ena seriously?"

"Trying to run away in front of me is a big deal. Do you think I'll let you?"

"Of course not. So I'm going to put up a shield."

Zervil said and turned his head towards Asel. Asel, who had been carefully watching the girl's magic until just now, trembled at the blatant gaze.

The moment Asel, who had finally come to his senses, got up to run away, Zervil's arm, which had been torn and stretched, grabbed Asel's hair.

"Aaaagh!"

Asel screamed in pain as if his scalp was being torn off. But Zervil didn't care.

He held Asel in his hand and swung him like a pendulum, bursting into a sly smile.

"Tada. An innocent citizen. Also, a child with a monstrous talent who was learning Mana on his own while watching our magic until just now!"

"...Shit."

"As you can see, he has a rough mouth, but that's only natural since he grew up in the slums. Anyway, I was originally going to conduct various experiments after discovering him, but Ena's appearance ruined it. It's a shame, but I have no choice but to let him go here."

Zervil said, shaking Asel's body up and down. In the process, the scalp was torn and blood flowed out.

Asel let out a suppressed groan at the stinging pain. Zervil glanced down at the flowing blood and turned his head back towards the girl.

"I thought about killing him, but that's a bit of a waste? I'm curious about what would happen if someone with this much talent learned magic... I also want to find him again later and resume the experiment. Haha! As you know, I'm a bit of an oddball, right?"

"......"

"I'm going to spare him, and I don't intend to interfere with his body separately! He's a child with overly good sensitivity, so if I interfere, it's the same as pouring impurities on him. Then the direction of growth will be strangely twisted. I don't really like that."

Zervil continued, spinning Asel's body around. Asel's face was already covered in blood flowing from his head.

"But I have to get paid for saving him. I'll use him as a shield for a while. If Ena uses magic, this child will become a roast and roll on the floor, right? If you don't mind, you can attack. I'll gladly take it."

Ah, except for high-level magic.

Zervil finished speaking and pulled out a rotten arm from his chest. Then, along with the other hand that was not holding Asel, he began to form an incantation. Unintelligible words popped out of his mouth, and the corpses that were standing as if protecting him gathered near Zervil.

The girl, Ena, looked at the scene with displeasure, but after seeing Asel's blood-soaked face, she gave up killing Zervil. She recovered all the Mana she had spread out, clicked her tongue, and watched Zervil's magic.

"It's a transfer art. You learned that too?"

"Haha, it's just a trick. A transfer art user I ate a few months ago knew a good magic. I improved it a bit."

"You answer well when I ask."

"Against a magician like you, how can I hide the Formula when I'm openly using magic? Rather than being found out, it's more comfortable for me to explain it myself... That's it."

Zervil finished the hand seal and condensed Foul energy in his hand. Then he struck a corpse lying on the floor hard.

Jjeo-jeo-jeok!

The body of the corpse that came into contact with his hand was torn vertically, and beyond that, a foul-smelling darkness unfolded. Zervil nodded with a satisfied expression.

"...A portal that can only use corpses. It's really just a trick."

"Right? But it's quite useful to me. Moreover, it's even more so for a magician like me who has modified his body to be close to a corpse."

Zervil said and threw Asel in front of the portal.

But he didn't let go completely. He grabbed Asel's nape with a gentle touch and bowed his head towards Ena.

"Then I'll be going. I hope we don't meet again."

"Well. The Federation's request to track you down only once ends here, but personally, I don't have good feelings for you."

Ena smiled and tilted her head to the side.

"I hope you have a good hostage with you next time we meet."

"Thank you for the advice."

Zervil finished speaking and simultaneously threw himself into the portal. His figure disappeared into the darkness, and the transference magic ceased only after the arm that had been gripping Asel's neck was sucked into the portal as well.

Only then did Asel clutch his neck, now marked with bright red welts, and gasp for breath.

Excruciating pain surged from his torn scalp. The pouring rain had washed away most of the blood from his face, but the injury had only worsened. Each fat raindrop that struck his head directly sent shivers of agony through him.

But, he had survived, at any rate. Torn skin? Considering he'd met a crazy wizard, it was a cheap price to pay. Asel slowly regulated his ragged breathing and exhaled deeply toward the sky.

"Little one."

As he did so, Ena, who had been standing there blankly, approached Asel. Asel let out a small "Ah," and then abruptly stood up and bowed deeply to Ena.

"Thank you, Wizard. I owe you my life. If you had been even a little later, I would have been tortured alive."

He meant it sincerely. If Ena had arrived any later, Asel would have been slowly dissected by Zervil's hands.

Furthermore, when Zervil was using Asel as a hostage to escape, Ena could have killed both Zervil and Asel if she had wanted to. But Ena hadn't, and thanks to that, Asel had survived. It was only natural to feel genuine gratitude toward such a person.

Ena recognized his sincerity and nodded with a faint smile.

"Yes, yes. I'm glad you're safe. I'll fix your torn head."

"Huh? You don't have to go that far..."

"No, stay still."

Ena ignored Asel's refusal and took out a red potion from her robes, pouring it over his head.

Immediately, Asel's wound began to heal rapidly. The pain also slowly began to disappear, and in a few seconds, the wound vanished cleanly. Asel, marveling at his head that no longer hurt even when exposed to the rain, bowed at a right angle once more.

"Thank you!"

"The cheek... just a moment."

Ena placed her hand on Asel's cheek where the flesh had rotted away. With a crackling sound, Mana was emitted from her palm. The Mana gently probed Asel's wound, extracting and obliterating the remaining Foul energy.

It was a delicate task that most wizards wouldn't even attempt, but it was not a difficult feat for her, a great wizard.

Ena poured another potion over the now-clean wound. Then, the rotting flesh slowly healed, soon returning to its original state. Asel offered his thanks once again to his cheek, where he no longer felt any pain.

"Thank youuu!"

"Mm."

Ena looked down at Asel with a gentle smile. As she did so, she saw something shimmering in Ena's eyes.

It was Mana. She tilted her head and slightly raised her Mana. In her eyes, which began to glow with a blue light, vivid Mana swirled around Asel.

"...Oh."

Ena exclaimed without realizing it. She couldn't help it.

It was common for great wizards or accomplished masters who had reached a certain level of mastery to be loved by Mana, but Ena had never seen so much Mana fluctuating around a child who hadn't even learned magic yet. It was that rare, an extraordinary talent that would be hard to find even if you searched the entire continent.

'Zervil was openly praising him, so I thought it was just nonsense. But it was true.'

She had lived a long life as a member of the Long-lived race, but life was still unpredictable. Who would have known that she would find someone with a talent surpassing that of the wizards of the destroyed Magic Kingdom in the slums of a corrupt kingdom? Ena wrapped her hand around the Mana swirling around Asel and thought.

He has great talent? I see. But should I leave such talent here?

Is it right to let such brilliant talent, which could bloom rapidly with someone's help, rot away in the slums? Wouldn't it be more beneficial to the continent if I took him in and raised him as a wizard?

And what if I leave him here and some strange people pick him up and he grows up to be a demon worshiper? Wouldn't that be inviting disaster?

Moreover, someone with outstanding talent for Mana has a very high value as a sacrifice. If I summon a demon using this child as a sacrifice, wouldn't a ruling entity emerge?

Thoughts continued to flow. Ena groaned and narrowed her eyes.

'Should I just take him with me?'

She hadn't really thought about taking on a disciple, but seeing such talent before her eyes, she couldn't help but feel greedy.

Come to think of it, the reason she hadn't taken on a disciple until now was because there was no one who caught her eye. Someone who is so loved by Mana is more than qualified to be her disciple.

'If other wizards saw him, they would be fighting over him, wouldn't they?'

She could already picture it. A wizard, like herself, who accidentally discovered Asel, took him as his disciple, and then appeared at the Alliance years later, boasting about his disciple's achievements.

Then the other wizards would feel envy and jealousy for not being able to take Asel as their disciple, and the master would chuckle at their plight.

Surely she would be grinding her teeth in regret and disappointment for not taking him as her disciple. In that case, it would be better for her to take him and take the position of master.

Unlike other wizards, Ena had no intention of showing off her disciple just because he was outstanding. There was no reason to do so, and there was no benefit to be gained from it. It would be enough if he just grew up well and became a strong wizard.

In that regard, Ena had no doubt that she could be a better master than other wizards. She nodded, imagining Asel, taken in by her, conjuring lightning instead of fire and ice.

Yes, she had decided.

"What's your name, child?"

Ena asked with a kind smile. Asel answered without hesitation.

"My name is Asel. I don't have a surname."

"I see. I'm Ena Renatus."

Ena introduced herself and gently stroked Asel's head. Then, she cleared her throat and said in a serious voice.

"Um... Asel? Can I make you a suggestion?"

"A suggestion?"

Asel asked back. Ena nodded and replied.

"Would you like to become my disciple?"

Even to this question, Asel's answer was immediate.

"I don't think I can."

A crack appeared in Ena's smile.

# 5 - Fate (2)

Asel looked at Ena's face, which was slowly hardening, and explained his current situation as quickly as possible before she misunderstood.

He compressed the story as much as possible: escaping his demon-worshipping parents and relying on the slums, working as a drug delivery boy there, and Evelyn originally worked in a factory but was now sick and needed medicine as soon as possible.

"So, becoming a disciple seems difficult. If I disappear, I'd have to leave my sister here alone."

Asel cared for Evelyn quite a bit. If they had grown up normally, the two would have bickered like any other siblings, but the environment in which Asel and Evelyn grew up was not easy.

The village where the two lived was a remote mountain village without a name. Only one or two people visited a year, and it was a closed group where only the residents lived together.

Asel and Evelyn grew up experiencing all kinds of absurdities there. They were beaten countless times and had to take care of all the chores in the village, such as cleaning up the livestock's feces and urine, chopping firewood, or fetching water.

Except for sleeping, they lived only to work hard all day long. It was as if they had been thrown into an environment where they had no choice but to rely on each other.

That relationship became even stronger as they left the village and settled in the slums. Therefore, Asel had no intention of leaving Evelyn here alone and disappearing on his own.

"You're a good brother."

Ena listened to Asel's unfortunate life story and said that with a pitiful smile. Then, she bent her knees and met his eyes.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of your sister as well as taking you as my disciple."

"...Really?"

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

Ena smiled softly. She brushed back Asel's hair, which was stuck to his face from the rain, and stood up.

"More than that, you said you needed to buy medicine for your sister now, right? Let's go. I have some medicine."

"...Medicine?"

"An Alchemist belonging to the same place often gives me various medicines. Among them, there is a medicine that cures any disease."

Ena turned to Asel and took out a few glass bottles rattling from her arms. From bottles containing ominous black liquid to bottles half-filled with elixirs of red, blue, and yellow. Ena floated them with Mana and carefully sorted them. She held a medicine filled with emerald liquid in her hand and smiled faintly.

"Lead the way."

Asel stood there blankly for a moment at those words, then began to walk ahead as if he had made up his mind. Ena followed him, recalling the method of taking the medicine she had heard from the Alchemist.

It had been a long time since she had walked on two feet without riding lightning.

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Ena frowned for a moment when she saw the house Asel led her to.

A shanty town on the verge of collapse, teeming with rats and bugs. The wooden walls, eaten away by insects, were riddled with holes, and the slightly sunken ceiling creaked precariously as if it would collapse on the interior of the house at any moment.

'People can live in a place like this.'

She admired the adaptability of humans and followed Asel, who had entered the house.

Passing through a wooden door that was embarrassing to even call a front door, a small girl lying in the middle of the living room caught her eye. She was sweating profusely and convulsing her limbs in a precarious state. Her face was red, like a lump of metal heated to the extreme.

"Sister!"

Asel screamed and ran towards Evelyn. He hurriedly patted Evelyn's shoulder and called her name, but there was no answer. She was just breathing roughly.

Even that was fading. Her limbs couldn't stay still, and her ragged clothes were sticking to her skin because of the cold sweat. It was difficult to take them off, and there were no clothes to change into in the first place. Asel gritted his teeth and removed the metal he had placed on Evelyn's forehead. Like the warmly heated metal, Evelyn's forehead was still hot.

"...Magician."

Asel called Ena with a face on the verge of tears. Even a child with an extraordinary brain for his age returns to being a child of that age when faced with the death of a blood relative and unable to do anything. Ena looked down at Asel, who was full of worry and concern, and smiled faintly as if to tell him not to worry.

There was no reason to delay. Ena immediately opened the lid of the medicine bottle she had taken out and began to slowly pour Mana into it.

Hwaaa!

When the pure Mana released without any change in properties touched the medicine, the emerald reagent began to glow with a subtle light. Ena poured Mana into it until the light was about to fade, and at the moment it darkened slightly. She carefully poured the reagent into Evelyn's mouth.

"……."

She gently lifted Evelyn's head to help her eat the medicine completely.

Ena nodded after confirming that Evelyn's neck had rippled once. Asel asked her with an anxious voice.

"...Is it all over?"

"Ah, yeah. If you wait about an hour, she'll open her eyes soon. The medicine is... already working."

Ena said, gently stroking Evelyn's forehead.

As she said, Evelyn's rough breathing had returned to normal at some point. Her convulsing limbs had also returned to their place, and except for the cold sweat that had formed, there seemed to be no additional cold sweat flowing. Asel came close to Evelyn and checked those things himself before letting out a sigh of relief.

"Haa..."

He plopped down nearby and wiped his face with his hands. Along with the distorted face following his gesture, anxiety and fear slowly peeled away. If he hadn't met Ena. If she hadn't readily extended her kindness, he probably would have lost Evelyn today.

Asel thought so and deeply bowed his head towards Ena, who was standing still and looking at him with a soft gaze.

"Thank you. It feels like no matter how many times I say it, it won't be enough. Thank you so much, really."

Ena smiled faintly at Asel's words of gratitude. She went to Asel's side, sat down gently, and took off the hat she was wearing.

"You don't have to say thank you. It's only natural for a teacher to help their disciple, right?"

"...Teacher, you say."

Asel asked back with a bitter smile. At that reaction, Ena turned to Asel with a look of disbelief.

"……You're not saying you won't become a disciple, are you?"

She thought she had earned some points by saving Evelyn, but was it still far off? Ena felt impatient inside.

Of course, she had no intention of showing off about saving Evelyn. She just saved her because she could. If Ena had no means to save Evelyn, she would not have saved Evelyn. So, complaining about this was an act that went beyond being pricked by conscience and disappeared altogether. She had experienced many things as a magician, but she still had a human heart.

'I thought I would have built up some goodwill, but I guess not.'

Ena pouted her lips slightly and hugged the hat in her hand weakly.

At that time, Asel opened his mouth as he watched Evelyn, who had begun to stir little by little.

"I want to if you'll have me. Being a disciple."

"……! Really?"

"Yes. But I don't know if I have any talent. I'm worried that you'll just be disappointed if you take me with you..."

"Disappointed?"

Ena scoffed and turned to Asel. Her eyes were filled with undisguised greed.

"If you want to disappoint me, a development like, 'Actually, I was a demon, and I stuck to you to suck your power,' has to come out. Other than that, you can't disappoint me. That's how special your talent is."

"……Is that so?"

"Of course. Besides, I've never seen someone awaken Mana on their own while watching a battle. You may not have fully realized it, but that alone is amazing. So..."

Ena smiled, tapping Asel's head with her hand.

"Let's go together. I'll teach you magic. I'll show you the world."

Ena reached out her hand to Asel. Asel stared blankly at the small, white hand, then smiled and extended his right hand.

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"Umm..."

Evelyn groaned and tossed and turned. She wriggled for a long time while lying down, then slowly began to open her eyes. Heavy eyelids covered her vision, but she shook off her sleepiness by getting up.

She usually got up right away, but why was she so tired today? Was it because she was sick and woke up?

She yawned refreshingly and looked around. Immediately after, her body froze.

"Uh, uh..."

The place she saw was unfamiliar. No, it was not just unfamiliar, but alien. Evelyn had never been in such a space in her life. She quickly began to acquire information, touching the floor that felt so soft and addictive with her hand.

The overall space was not very large. At most, about the size of a master bedroom. However, the walls, which were finished using high-quality wood, told her that this space was by no means a slum.

What about the ceiling? It was luxuriously packaged overall, and a lantern with flickering yellow light brightly illuminated the space.

Warm sunlight was seeping into the space through the transparent window on the wall, and the scenery beyond the window was changing rapidly. When she observed it closely, it seemed to be moving. No, it wasn't just seeming to move, it was really moving. Evelyn was startled and covered her mouth with her hand.

'Am I kidnapped?'

Ominous imaginations arose in her head. She recalled the situation just before she fell asleep and cast her gaze to the opposite side. And in her eyes, she saw a strange white woman and Asel sitting there. The two of them were so busy talking about something that they didn't even notice that Evelyn had woken up.

"Detailed education will start after we arrive in Wiheim. Before that, I'll just tell you what Mana and Mana are."

"Mana is the substance that forms the basis of this world, and Mana is the power that magicians use to refine Mana and manifest magic. Is that right?"

"……What, how did you know?"

"I read the book in the carriage. That's what it said there."

"You read a book? You can read?"

"It's a small skill."

The content of the conversation did not enter her ears. Only the figures of the two people were clearly visible in Evelyn's eyes. She gasped and was about to faint when she recalled the words Asel had uttered with a determined expression and opened her mouth.

'He said he would be back before sunset, he said he would get medicine! In the end, did he sell himself to get the medicine money?'

Tears welled up in Evelyn's eyes. She glared at the paper the suspicious woman had taken out and bit her lip.

That paper must be a slave contract. If she just tore that, Asel could be freed. Evelyn thought so and jumped up from her seat. At that big movement, the two finally noticed that Evelyn had woken up.

"Sister!"

Asel shouted in a bright voice. Evelyn glanced at him for a moment, then glared at Ena and spat out.

"Let Asel go! You witch!"

"Sister?"

"Huh?"

Asel said with his eyes wide open, and Ena, who was quietly planning to watch the two reunite, tilted her head.

She stared at Evelyn, who was glaring at her with hostile eyes, and thought with a serious expression.

Is she not fully recovered yet?

"Let him go! Witch!"

It seemed that way.

# 6 - City of Wizards

“I’m sorry!”

After hearing the whole story, Evelyn immediately slammed her head onto the floor of the carriage.

The carriage, with its neatly trimmed wood and magical finishing touches, had been modified to make even the floor feel soft. Evelyn admired the sensation of the wood gently cushioning her forehead, then quickly snapped to attention and shouted again.

“I’m sorry! Please, just this once, have mercy!”

“…It’s alright, so lift your head.”

Haa. Ena sighed deeply and gently patted Evelyn’s shoulder. Despite the feather-light touch, Evelyn flinched and quickly straightened up. She stood at attention, watching Ena’s expression. A faint, unhidden fear lingered in her eyes.

Ena could understand. She knew very well the public perception of mages.

Self-righteous, arrogant, and prone to causing trouble when things didn’t go their way. Morons. While long periods of training and cultivation in magic would naturally lead to humility, only a few mages ever reached that stage. In the current magical society, where most mages fell short, it was only natural that the perception of mages was at rock bottom.

Evelyn, having grown up in the slums, undoubtedly had an even worse impression of mages. Mages who ended up in the slums were usually there for illegal rituals or experiments, so it was only common sense for Evelyn to be wary of mages, even if she had only heard rumors. Besides, most of those rumors were true.

‘Should I correct the misunderstanding?’

Ena thought for a moment, then shook her head.

Time would solve the problem anyway. Evelyn would be around while Asel was her apprentice, and magic wasn’t a discipline one could master in a year or two. They would be living in the same house for at least ten years, so they would naturally grow closer during that time. There was no need to bring it up now.

“U-Um…”

While Ena was lost in thought, Evelyn, who had been watching her carefully, cautiously spoke. Only then did Ena realize she had been staring at Evelyn. She gave a wry smile and said, “Ah, sorry. I was just thinking for a moment. Are you feeling alright?”

“Yes, yes! I was in so much pain until yesterday, but now I feel completely fine!”

“That’s good. The medicine must have worked well.”

Ena nodded and glanced sideways.

She noticed Asel, who had been anxiously watching the situation unfold, was now reading a book as soon as she saw the atmosphere had eased.

The book was titled <Introduction to Magic> in large letters. It was useless to Ena, but she couldn’t bring herself to throw it away, so she had left it in the carriage. It seemed Asel had found it.

Ena wondered if she should call it resourceful. She chuckled and leaned back into the chair.

She didn’t bother to tell Asel what to do or not to do. That was something to be done after they arrived in Wiheim, not now. It wasn’t like she had started her formal training yet.

Besides, disturbing a mage while they were reading was considered one of the greatest taboos. Although Asel wasn’t a formal mage yet, Ena respected her as she devoured the book with sparkling eyes.

“……”

“……”

Silence filled the carriage. Only the occasional sound of pages turning could be heard. Ena gently closed her eyes and hugged her large hat, while Evelyn watched Asel intently, carefully observing Ena’s expression.

“…Um.”

Unlike Asel, Evelyn couldn’t read. So she didn’t know the title of the book Asel was reading, nor could she understand its contents. However, she had heard earlier that Asel had become a mage’s apprentice, so she could guess that the book was related to magic.

‘A mage’s apprentice.’

Evelyn suddenly thought as she looked out the window. A cool breeze blew past the quickly passing scenery.

She knew Asel had been different from others since she was young. But she never dreamed that it was evidence of her talent as a mage.

Of course, it was something to celebrate. A child born in a nameless mountain village becoming a mage’s apprentice. Evelyn felt joy and fulfillment at the fact that the protagonist of a story that seemed straight out of a novel was her own sister.

But there was one thing that bothered her. It was about herself.

‘Am I becoming a burden?’

Asel had said that she couldn’t leave her alone in the slums, so she had become an apprentice on the condition that they could go together. Evelyn felt grateful for those words, but she also felt a sense of guilt. A negative thought flashed through her mind, wondering if she was hindering her sister’s life.

“Don’t worry.”

At that moment, Ena’s voice was heard. Evelyn was startled and turned to face Ena. Ena, with one eye half-open, looked at Evelyn and moved her lips.

“I know what you’re thinking, but there’s no need to worry so much. I have no intention of letting you sit around and do nothing. And it would be better for you, who sees that as a burden, right?”

“…How did you know?”

“It’s all written on your face.”

Ena smiled faintly and closed her eyes again.

“Anyway, I won’t treat you as a means to tie down our apprentice. And I’ll help you until you can do your part as a full-fledged person, so don’t think strange things and get along well with Asel. You’re old enough to do that.”

“…Master Mage.”

Evelyn looked at Ena with tearful eyes, deeply moved.

Wasn’t that what a mother was like? Evelyn was so touched by Ena that she unconsciously thought that.

How much experience did she have to have to possess such broad insight?

She surrendered herself to the wave of emotions and unconsciously opened her mouth.

“How old are you, Master Mage?”

“Evelyn.”

Ena’s eyes snapped open.

Evelyn immediately lowered her gaze.

A mage was, after all, a mage.

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Wiheim, the hometown of the Great Mages.

The place where Ena’s mansion was located, and the city of mages ruled by the Magic Federation. A closed-off place where only those with permission to enter could pass through, and outsiders were thoroughly filtered out.

Ena explained the destination they were currently heading towards in that way.

“Getting permission to enter is quite difficult. It’s relatively simple if you belong to the Magic Tower or the Witch Council, but it’s still difficult. However, a mage affiliated with the Federation can enter Wiheim at any time.”

Magic Tower, Witch Council, Federation.

Asel tilted her head at the names of the organizations she was hearing for the first time. Ena kindly explained them. If she was going to dedicate herself to magic, she would have to know about them all anyway.

“The Magic Tower is an organization where mages who study the same type of magic gather.”

There were many branches of attributes and types in magic. Elemental magic alone was divided into fire, water, wind, and earth, and there were also pure-type magic, Electromancy, gravity, enchantment, and many other magics that were deeply ingrained in magical society.

However, unlike the branches of magic, the number of Magic Towers was smaller than expected. This meant that there was not one Magic Tower for each type of magic.

Just as there were mainstream and non-mainstream types of magic, those who mainly dealt with non-mainstream magic did not bother to establish Magic Towers and instead created other organizations to share information among themselves. Even if that wasn’t the case, there were magics that were only handled by specific organizations other than the Magic Tower, so the Magic Tower could not correspond one-to-one with magic.

One of the magics treated in that way was Electromancy. Electromancy, which was only passed down in the Witch Council, had a structure in which a Magic Tower could not exist due to its special nature. The reason Ena could use Electromancy was because she belonged to the Witch Council.

Asel asked a question that came to mind after hearing the word Witch Council.

“Are there only women in the Witch Council?”

“It used to be that way, but not anymore. There are some men too. But there are less than ten of them.”

Ena said as she injected Mana into the carriage’s power source. The Mana-powered carriage, which ran silently, continued to move day and night without needing to worry about the horses resting.

Ena glanced at the darkening sky and continued.

“Unlike the Magic Tower, the Witch Council doesn’t only deal with specific magics, but comprehensively handles most magics. There are also mages who deal with unusual magics that are not easily seen, such as the Electromancy that I use, the Floramancy that handles flowers, and the Harmonization Magic that manipulates emotions. There are also some who deal with Bloodline Inheritance Magic.”

You can learn those things in the Witch Council.

Ena said, conjuring lightning in her hand. The crackling, pure white lightning brightly illuminated the inside of the carriage.

“But I’m the only Electromancer right now.”

Unusual magics were as difficult to learn as they were rare. Those who manipulated emotions often went mad in the process of learning, and those who handled flowers had to know everything about life science, botany, and the effects of Mana on plants in order to use it. Electromancy also had prerequisites that matched its destructive power and might.

That was the reason why only Ena could currently handle Electromancy. There were quite a few mages who boldly challenged Electromancy, but they all died, consumed by their own lightning and turned to ashes. The end of those who took the notoriety of unusual magics lightly was so miserable.

“There are two conditions for joining the Witch Council. Either you have a recommendation from an elder of the Witch Council, or you become an apprentice of a mage belonging to the Witch Council. I was the former, and you, Asel, will be the latter.”

“…Am I affiliated with the Witch Council?”

“Yes. Congratulations. Let’s make a registration card first when we arrive in Wiheim.”

Ena stroked Asel’s sullen face and continued.

“Lastly, the Federation is… a bit unique. It’s a place where all kinds of mages gather. There are mages belonging to the Magic Tower, and mages belonging to the Witch Council. There are also quite a few mages belonging to organizations that are not publicly known.”

“……”

“This is due to the Federation’s special nature. As long as you pass the joining exam, you immediately become a member of the Federation, regardless of your affiliation. You don’t even have to leave the organization you originally belonged to.”

So double affiliation was possible. Asel nodded.

“Are you also affiliated with the Federation, Master?”

“Yes. But I didn’t take the exam separately, they just asked me to join because a Great Mage position was vacant there.”

“……”

“I was annoyed at first, but the benefits that Federation-affiliated mages receive in Wiheim are more than I thought, so I’m satisfied with it now.”

Ena added that the carriage she was currently riding in was also provided by the Federation.

A silent carriage. A privilege that only high-ranking mages of the Federation could enjoy, and an object that had become a symbol among thieves that should never be touched. Asel thought that was why she hadn’t been attacked while passing through the forest at night for a day since leaving for Wiheim.

“Do you have any more questions?”

At Ena’s question, Asel hesitated for a moment and shook her head. She was only more curious about the contents related to magic. She said that she would start in earnest after arriving in Wiheim, so there was nothing more to ask.

The three of them continued to head towards Wiheim, occasionally talking. Asel spent her time reading books, asking Ena if she didn’t know something, or chatting with Evelyn. And after another day, Asel woke up to the feeling of the carriage stopping with a thud.

“Are you awake?”

Ena asked, wearing a large conical hat. Asel greeted her with a good morning, then looked at Evelyn, who was sleeping leaning against the wall. Then, she pulled back the curtains that had been drawn.

Swish.

As the curtains were pulled back, bright sunlight illuminated the inside of the carriage. Asel squinted at the light, then gaped at the scenery that unfolded beyond the window.

“……Wow.”

Black walls built as if to reach the sky. The countless Formula and Mana fluctuations engraved on the outside were conveyed to Asel, who had vaguely realized Mana.

A huge floating island floating in the sky and a long spire that accurately pierced through the island. Colorful starlight hanging from the end of it. Even the geometric patterns covering the sky.

Asel couldn’t close her mouth at the feast of mysteries she was seeing for the first time.

# 7 - City of Wizards (2)

Wiheim's massive ramparts were a creation of a mage named Grimebel, who had reached the pinnacle of Great Magician status with Armed Formula.

While typical Armed Formula could only construct armaments like swords, shields, or spears, Grimebel was a monster who went further, even creating fortresses and siege weapons. He not only elevated the originally third-rate Armed Formula into a legitimate branch of magic but also became a grandmaster who created a new magical system specifically for Armed Formula.

It was no accident that Grimebel was mentioned as one of the great mages who founded Wiheim. The Leader of the League, in recognition of his achievements, decreed that those guarding Wiheim's ramparts should consist only of those who had mastered Armed Formula like Grimebel.

That tradition continues to this day.

"Is this a properly issued pass?"

One of the mages guarding the ramparts, Hans, asked, waving the pass that a merchant had handed him. The merchant nodded with a confident expression.

"What a ridiculous question to ask! Of course, it's a pass officially issued through the League."

"Hmm..."

"Rather than that, hurry up and let me in. I've been waiting for over an hour already. It would be good to get in quickly, even for the sake of the people behind me."

The merchant shouted, gesturing to the long line stretching behind him. But Hans didn't budge.

He took out a perforated crystal ball, a standard item for guards, and slipped the pass inside. It was a Magical artifact created to verify the authenticity of passes. If it was genuine, the crystal ball would emit a yellow light, and if it was fake, it would emit a red light. As soon as the pass the merchant handed over entered the crystal ball, it emitted a red light.

There was no need to look further. Hans clicked his tongue and tore the pass to shreds. The merchant, taken aback by the ruthless action, turned red in the face.

"H-Hey! What do you think you're doing, tearing it like that!"

"Your pass was not genuine. Therefore, following proper procedure, entry is denied."

"What nonsense are you spouting! How much do you think I paid for this pass!"

"Unless it's a pass issued directly through the League, most of them are fake. Please direct your fraud inquiries to where you purchased the pass, and now, step aside. As you said, there are many people waiting behind you."

"W-What is this—!"

The merchant, veins bulging in his neck, approached Hans. But he couldn't take more than one step. Before he knew it, a golden longsword was hanging at his waist where nothing had been before. The longsword, constructed with Armed Formula, exuded a menacing Foul energy just by existing.

"...Shit."

The merchant spat out a curse at Hans's cold gaze and turned away. He got into the carriage he had arrived in and began to move in the opposite direction of Wiheim. Only when his figure was out of sight did Hans turn his head toward the next visitor.

"......?"

It was then. Hans noticed a child who had left the queue, wearing a conical hat, walking toward the ramparts.

Staring at the towering ramparts with an intrigued look, and walking in shabby clothes unlike the luxurious hat they wore, the sight was quite incongruous.

"......Haa."

'There are so many tiring things happening today.'

Thinking so, Hans excused himself to a mage who was next in line after the merchant and shouted at the approaching child.

"Hey—."

Even though he didn't raise his voice much, the voice imbued with Mana was more than enough for the child. The child turned their head toward Hans at the voice that gently pierced their ears. Then, their face, which had been hidden by the hat, was fully revealed.

'They're pretty.'

That was all the impression he had. Hans gestured dismissively at the child looking at him, telling them to go away.

"Kid, if you want to enter Wiheim, get in line. Or hold your mom's hand tightly."

"I don't have a mom?"

A critical hit out of nowhere. Hans coughed dryly, feeling the gaze of the mage staring at him like trash.

"Ahem... Then join the line. Just because you come from the side doesn't mean we'll let you in first."

"My teacher told me to go here?"

"Teacher...?"

Teacher, huh. Hans frowned and glared at the child.

'Do they have delusions at that age?'

Becoming a mage's disciple at a young age? It's common, but that's only for the children of noble families, not for citizens who wear such shabby clothes.

In the first place, these people would be lucky to see a mage once or twice in their lives. Even nobles have a hard time seeing mages, let alone commoners. But a teacher? Moreover, a mage's disciple who can freely pass through Wiheim without formal entry procedures? It was absurd.

Still, Hans opened his mouth, thinking there might be a chance.

"What's your teacher's name?"

"Ena Renatus."

"......Who?"

"Ena Renatus. She said everyone would know if I said The Beginning?"

Of course, he knew the name. He also knew the alias, The Beginning. But Hans couldn't help but freeze on the spot.

The first reason was that an unexpected big shot's name popped out of the child's mouth, and the second reason was that, upon closer inspection, the hat the child was wearing was exactly the same as the one Ena usually wore.

Even when he overlaid Mana on his eyes, he could see lightning crackling from the hat.

There was no room for doubt. There was only one owner of such destructive and threatening Electrification Property Magic on the continent.

"I greet Ena's disciple."

Hans immediately bowed to Asel.

The disciples of the League's Great Magicians held high status in their own right. The first meeting with such people was very important. It didn't matter after the first meeting, but the first meeting had to be treated in a manner befitting their status. That was the tradition.

So, it was only natural for Hans to change his attitude in an instant. But Asel was at a loss for words at the sight of a burly stranger suddenly bowing to them.

"Oh, um..."

"......"

An awkward standoff ensued. Asel scratched their cheek and stared at Hans's balding crown, while Hans stared blankly at the ground, blinking.

'When is he going to tell me to raise my head?'

'When do I raise my head?'

Thoughts running parallel passed through both of their minds. Asel had never spoken down to someone much older than them as if it were second nature, and Hans had never imagined that Ena wouldn't have told them about Wiheim's traditions.

The standoff between the two continued until Ena and Evelyn, who had shrunk the carriage, returned.

"......What are you doing?"

Ena asked, blinking at the bizarre scene unfolding before her eyes. Asel looked at Ena, who was adjusting her hat, and shook their head as if they didn't know either. Ena lightly ruffled her disciple's hair and turned her gaze to Hans.

"Get up."

Hans immediately raised his upper body at the quiet words. Even in the process, he didn't look Ena directly in the eye. There was no need to do so, but Hans showed the utmost respect to one of Wiheim's top Great Magicians.

He immediately knelt on one knee, lowered his head slightly, and said.

"I greet the League's Great Magician."

"Yeah. Can we go in?"

Ena got straight to the point. Hans replied as if he was used to it.

"Of course."

"Okay. Good work."

"Yes! Have a safe trip!"

Ena waved her hand at Hans and stepped inside the ramparts. Asel and Evelyn followed right behind Ena. Asel muttered in a small voice as they passed Hans, who was bowing deeply.

"Have a good one."

Evelyn also chimed in.

"Why is your head empty?"

Hans didn't hold back.

Thwack.

"Ouch!"

"New external Mana power source! Mages who want to try it, please line up here!"

"Ancient Magical tome from the Demon Realm will be auctioned off today. Those interested, please stop by."

"T-This is a new potion made by my teacher! If you drink it, your lost hair will grow back—"

"Five gold coins!"

"Six gold coins! Bring it here right now!"

"Kyaa, kyaaa!!"

Loud noises were heard from all directions. Asel walked through Wiheim's bustling downtown area, looking around with an intrigued gaze. They had expected a static atmosphere, thinking it was a city of mages, but the streets were more vibrant than they had thought.

Moving their gaze, they saw giant golems walking around, making heavy footsteps. On their backs were many gemstones shimmering in iridescent colors, all of which were high-quality products that had grown while holding Mana for a long time.

"Those are gemstones provided to Gemstone Magicians. The better the quality of the gemstones, the more Mana they contain, the more efficient the Formula becomes."

Ena explained, reading their gaze. Asel nodded, exclaiming, "Ah."

Gemstone Magicians, huh. There were also mages who manipulated magic through gemstones.

Asel wondered how many types of magic existed and continued to follow Ena. In the meantime, something moved through the sky at a rapid pace. A huge shadow fell on the ground, and Asel and Evelyn raised their heads.

Swoosh!

What was gliding across the vast land was a monstrous bird covered in flames. With its overwhelming size and scattering a large amount of heat around it, the monstrous bird felt mysterious just by looking at it. Asel stared at the bird circling in the sky with their mouth open.

'It's an existence made of Mana.'

They instinctively realized the essence of the bird. The Mana that they had faintly awakened while watching the battle between Zervil and Ena had expanded their senses. Thanks to this, they could vaguely sense not only the essence of the bird but also the countless magical aftereffects spread throughout Wiheim and the barrier.

[Hmm?]

At that moment, the giant monstrous bird felt Asel's gaze and slightly lowered its head. Then, Asel and the monstrous bird's eyes met. Asel flinched at the fiercely burning gaze, but regardless, the monstrous bird observed them up and down and muttered in a voice mixed with laughter.

[Another strange monster has come in again.]

The voice was transmitted to Asel on the Mana. To be exact, it was only transmitted to them. No one could hear the message sent by the spirit except for the designated target.

"......"

But Ena sensed the subtle Mana aftereffects and slightly raised her head toward the monstrous bird. The monstrous bird, meeting her blue gaze, twisted the corners of its mouth and flapped its wings.

[Looking again, it seems a monster brought a monster? An existence brought by a mage who tears the sky with lightning...]

"Parnin."

Ena murmured in a low voice. Then the monstrous bird called Parnin burst into laughter.

[Alright, alright. I'll go back to the way I was going. My contractor is already urging me to come quickly. I guess they're going to do another strange experiment this time.]

"......"

[Then see you next time. Two monsters and one human.]

Parnin left those words and waved its wings greatly. At the same time, its figure became a single flame and disappeared beyond the horizon in an instant. Asel stared at the red trail left in the sky, their eyes sparkling. Ena stared blankly at the sight, then smiled and turned her gaze away.

'Let's just let them be amazed.'

There was no reason to run to Asel right away and tell them that Parnin was actually a high-ranking fire spirit who had escaped because he was bored with the spirit realm, and that his contractor was a crazy arsonist.

Instead, she simply tapped Asel on the shoulder, who was standing still. Only then did Asel come to their senses and start walking again, following Ena.

About 10 minutes passed like that. Before they knew it, a dense forest had spread around the three of them instead of the bustling downtown area. The eerie atmosphere unique to the forest was not felt at all. Only immense Mana and vitality floated in the air.

Asel sensed the Mana circling near them and lightly waved their hand. Then, the Mana gently brushed through their fingers. Although it wasn't felt in detail, Asel had the thought that the sensation was like a child whining to play with them.

The Mana that had passed by did not move away as it was but began to surround Asel again.

Suddenly, Zervil's words came to mind. He had said that they had excellent Mana affinity and sensitivity. They didn't know exactly what that meant, but Asel guessed that it meant that Mana was friendly in this way.

They hadn't felt it in the slums, but after vaguely awakening Mana and coming to a place rich in Mana, they could definitely recognize their existence. Although they couldn't feel a sense of self, they could definitely recognize the purity of Mana.

'It feels good.'

Asel felt the aftereffects of the Mana that had passed by, shaking their bangs slightly, and smiled softly.

Ena, who already knew their talent, smiled softly at the sight.

On the other hand, Evelyn wondered if her younger sibling had suddenly become strange and covered her mouth with her hand. But Asel didn't care about them at all and enjoyed the Mana that wrapped around their body.

As they walked a little further, Ena suddenly stopped and opened her mouth.

"We're here."

At the calm voice, Asel, who had been intoxicated with Mana, returned to reality. They raised their head and moved their gaze toward where Ena was pointing.

"This is our house."

There stood a mansion that was intimidating just to look at. A white lightning bolt roughly wrapped around the front gate, and lightning crackled above the lightning rod embedded at the top of the mansion, scattering thunderbolts throughout the mansion.

Crackle.

Small lightning sparks flew around the area where the lightning struck. At the same time, the Magical artifacts that were scattered haphazardly in the garden began to wriggle as if they had come to life.

An object that looked like scissors cut off the sparsely grown raw wood, and white lightning poured from a teapot, burning the fallen leaves and twigs. In addition, the sound of lightning striking was heard everywhere.

No matter how you looked at it, it was not a normal mansion. Asel opened their mouth at the lightning bolts that were striking around them, and Evelyn trembled her lips and muttered softly.

"...Is this an execution ground?"

# 8 - The City of Wizards (3)

Unlike its menacing exterior, the interior of the mansion was surprisingly neat. Not a speck of dust existed, and all the furniture and rooms were cleaned as if they were brand new. Unlike the outside of the mansion, there was no lightning inside. Asel was secretly disappointed by that. Evelyn grimaced at her brother's strange taste for lightning.

Crossing the threshold of the mansion, a grand hall appeared. It was spacious enough to hold a party. Having never been to such a large and clean place in their lives, Asel and Evelyn felt a slight sense of intimidation without realizing it. Ena spoke to them in a light voice.

"Get used to it. You'll be living here from now on."

The two nodded, but their eyes still darted around as if they were still awkward.

It was a problem that time would solve. Ena left the two as they were and turned her head towards someone coming down the stairs in the center of the hall. It was a woman who looked to be just an adult. She had just taken a shower, her hair still dripping wet, and her brown eyes were wide.

"Oh, Lady Ena."

"Hailey."

Ena called her name. Hailey hurried down the stairs and stood in front of Ena. Because she was two heads taller than Ena, Ena had to look up at her. Ena frowned as if she was bothered by that, but Hailey tilted her head without showing any sign of concern.

"You're back sooner than I thought? I thought it would take another six months."

"...I found the Corpse Lord faster than expected."

"Did you kill it?"

"I missed it."

"Ahahaha, you're so funny."

Hailey chuckled and received the hat and cloak that Ena handed her.

"Lady Ena missing someone? You always shoot lightning or subdue them with Word magic if you don't like them. It's not for nothing that you're nicknamed the crazy mage who only knows how to shoot lightning.

"...Hailey."

"Like last time, when Letitia came and started saying all sorts of things, you immediately cast 'Shut up' and chased her away with lightning. Lady Ena missing a Corpse Lord? I'd rather believe that a demon repented and became a priest—"

[Shut up.]

"Uuuuugh?! Ugh! Uubbeubeub!!"

Hailey's mouth, which had been chattering noisily, closed tightly as if it had been sewn shut. Ena turned away from Hailey, who was jumping around while grabbing her mouth, and turned to Asel and Evelyn.

"Let's go. I'll show you the empty rooms, so pick one you like and go in."

"Uugh?"

Only then did Hailey notice Asel and Evelyn's presence and tilted her head. She pointed at the two of them and hovered in front of Ena, gesturing to ask who they were. Ena answered roughly in a tired voice.

"My disciple and your replacement."

"Uuuugh!!!"

Hailey's eyes widened at the calm declaration. Before she could say anything more, Ena took the two of them and went up to the second-floor hallway.

The hallway was as neatly maintained as the hall on the first floor. Warmth emanated from the wooden floor, ceiling, and walls, and Magic lamps installed throughout the hallway softly illuminated it. Asel noticed that the warmth emanating from all directions was a type of magic and looked around with interested eyes.

Meanwhile, Ena pointed to an empty room with her finger and said.

"From here to there. All of them are empty rooms. Just pick one each."

"Any one?"

"Yeah. Any one."

Ena nodded in response to Evelyn's question. Asel and Evelyn hesitated for a moment at those words, but soon cautiously grabbed any room and turned the doorknob. The room that unfolded was a very large and clean space that the two had never seen or heard of in their lives. The two simultaneously exclaimed in admiration and stood in front of their chosen rooms, looking at each other.

"What are you doing?"

Ena chuckled at the sight. It was a laugh that came from seeing something cute rather than mocking.

Asel and Evelyn looked at each other for a moment, then nodded and went into their respective rooms.

'She told us to get used to it.'

Let's not be surprised by things like this anymore. Asel thought as he walked around the room. However, his body twitched with every step he took.

Just because he had made up his mind didn't mean he could change immediately. Having lived his whole life in slums and closed-off villages, he still needed more time to adapt to a place like this. That's why Ena decided to give the two of them time to get used to it.

"Hailey will bring you clothes to change into in a little while. Rest until then, and then come to my room after you change. You'll see it right away when you come up to the third floor."

Ena left those words and snapped her fingers. Then, her body turned into a streak of pure white lightning and disappeared in an instant. Asel stared blankly at the afterimage of the lightning she left behind, then closed the door and began to look around the room a little more.

About five minutes passed, and after finishing his tour, Asel took a long breath and plopped down on the bed.

The feeling of the bed, which he was experiencing for the first time, was not much different from what he had felt in his past life. Perhaps that was why he didn't feel as overwhelmed as he did when he first saw the mansion. He was impressed, but it was only for a moment. He took a long breath as he looked at the brightly burning Magic lamp.

"......It's starting."

He had accepted Ena's declaration to become a disciple, but he had not yet received proper guidance. He had only heard explanations about Mana, Mana, and Aura while traveling in the carriage.

How to form a Mana Core, how to increase one's rank. The types of magic and aptitude, etc. He had only heard simple explanations about these things. He suppressed his curiosity, waiting for the time when he would be told the details after arriving in Wiheim. And now, having arrived in Wiheim and even received a room like this, he began to feel that he had become a mage's disciple.

'Can I do well?'

Asel suddenly thought that, then shook his head and brushed away his thoughts.

It's not can I do well. I can do well. Asel recalled all the evaluations he had heard about himself on the way here.

Zervil had called him an excellent test subject. This was because of his excellent Mana sensitivity, control, and affinity. As soon as Ena recognized his talent, she offered him the chance to become her disciple, and Parnin, the strange bird he met in Wiheim, called him the same monster as Ena.

There was nothing negative. Everyone was just interested and impressed by his extreme talent, which they were seeing for the first time.

He had only heard those evaluations in that short period of less than a month. There was no reason to be intimidated.

Of course, he had no intention of being arrogant. Even overwhelming talent is just a jewel buried in stone forever if it lacks humility. Asel calmed his eyes and took a long breath.

"Knock, knock."

At that moment, Hailey's voice was heard from outside the door. Asel exclaimed, "Ah," and jumped up from his seat to open the door. Beyond the open door, Hailey, who had brought clothes to change into, was standing with a smile. She looked down at Asel and waved her hand.

"Hi?"

Hailey greeted him in a cute voice. Asel bowed his head and greeted her in return.

"Hello......"

"Yeah, yeah. Can I come in?"

"Ah, yes. Please come in."

"Then excuse me~"

Hailey said that and strode into the room. Asel confirmed that she was sitting on the bed and closed the door, sitting next to her. Then, Hailey narrowed her eyes and looked at Asel.

"Sitting next to me. Is this flirting?"

"What is that?"

"You don't need to know."

Hailey chuckled and scanned Asel up and down. Asel accepted her gaze without any particular resistance. It wasn't a negative gaze anyway.

"You're Lady Ena's disciple, right?"

"Yes."

"Then that pretty girl is my replacement?"

"......I guess so?"

"Hehehehe...... My first replacement. My first replacement."

Hailey chuckled slyly and fidgeted with her hands.

"I was having such a hard time managing this mansion alone, and now a newbie is finally coming."

"You manage it alone?"

Asel asked with a surprised expression.

The mansion where Ena lived was by no means small. The first floor alone was packed with all sorts of facilities, and there were two more floors above that. It was not only insufficient but impossible to manage alone. But Hailey chuckled and replied in a nonchalant tone.

"There are quite a few Magical artifacts suitable for managing the mansion. Plus, I'm pretty good at Life magic, so there were no problems!"

"Life magic?"

"Yeah. You don't know about it?"

Asel nodded. Then Hailey smiled and reached out to Asel.

Wooong.

A faint Mana was condensed at her fingertips. Hailey muttered as she poked at the dirty part of Asel's clothes with her brightly shining hand.

[Clean]

Along with the manifestation of the magic, a pure white light grew in size and devoured the filth. The light did not stop there, but wrapped around the entire garment and neatly Incinerated the soiled parts. And it subsided only when there was no more filth to devour. Asel looked down at his clothes, which were as clean as new except for the torn parts, and exclaimed in admiration.

"So this is magic."

"How is it? Amazing, right? Originally, I could only clean one spot! But I modified the Formula myself, and it became such a great magic!"

Asel doesn't know much about the magic system yet. But he could definitely tell that modifying the Formula was not an easy task. Hailey, who had always seemed so cheerful to him, began to look a little different.

"Are you a mage too, Hailey?"

"I am a mage, but I'm a mage who can only use Life magic. But I'm probably the best in Wiheim when it comes to the living part! I'm the only one who studies this magic!"

Hailey said in a triumphant tone. Asel exclaimed, "Ooh," and applauded. Perhaps it was thanks to Hailey's friendly attitude. Asel seemed to be getting more comfortable with her.

"Do you need an aptitude to use Life magic?"

"No. Anyone who has learned magic can use it. It's one of the easiest magics."

"I see."

Asel nodded. He clenched and unclenched his fist, thinking about the path of Mana that Hailey had just shown him.

'Mana moved from the heart to the fingertips. And from there, the Formula was activated, and the magic was manifested externally.'

After coming to Wiheim, his sense of detecting Mana and Mana seemed to have improved dramatically. He was able to feel the magic throughout the city, and his sensitivity naturally increased as he communicated with the Mana of the forest. Asel once again recalled Hailey's magic and narrowed his eyes.

He recalled the basics of magic he had read in a book. It was a book that was lying around in the carriage, but the contents of the book, which was once a popular introduction to magic, came to Asel's mind.

'Mana from the outside is converted into Mana and stored in the caster's Mana Core. Magic is performed by releasing this stored Mana to the outside through a Formula.'

Mana Core. In the end, that means you can't use magic without it. Because you can't store Mana in your body, it's impossible to release it to the outside through a Formula. In the first place, people who don't have a Mana Core usually have a hard time feeling Mana itself.

But Asel is feeling Mana even at this moment. The faint Mana floating around Hailey and the enormous amount of Mana swirling around him. The moment he recognizes it and waves his hand, they move following his gesture.

'I think I can do it.'

He had a feeling that he could.

So he decided to try it for now.

Asel closed his eyes and focused his mind on the Mana surrounding him. Hailey tilted her head at his sudden action and placed the clothes she had brought on the bed.

"Now put this on and go to Lady Ena."

"......"

"Asel?"

Hailey's words did not reach his ears. All of Asel's five senses and mind were focused solely on Mana.

In general, you need the help of a knight or mage who has awakened Mana to feel Mana. They make skin contact with their disciples and show them the new senses needed to feel Mana, leaving traces of it at the same time. Then the disciple can build a Mana Core or Aura more easily than before.

Asel skipped that process.

He watched the battle between Zervil and Ena and learned how to feel Mana on his own. He also understood Mana through the books he read on the way to Wiheim, and after arriving in Wiheim, he vaguely gained knowledge about the characteristics of Mana by sensing the magic laid out everywhere.

Mana is the power obtained by refining Mana. It is a pure and stable power obtained by cleanly detoxifying Mana, which basically has some impurities mixed in.

'But you need a Core to refine it.'

It is impossible to convert Mana floating outside into Mana without a Core. That was like trying to eliminate all the pollution on the continent with a very small purification device. No matter how good the performance of the purification device, it was a meaningless waste of effort.

The same goes for Asel's talent. No matter how outstanding his talent was, it was impossible to freely change the Mana that roamed the world freely. It would be possible to control Mana through excellent Mana control, but it was impossible to freely convert Mana into Mana without a Core.

So in the end, the first thing to do was to build a Core. Asel took a long breath, erased his distractions, and focused only on feeling Mana again.

He had heard about what a Core was from Ena, but he had not yet heard how to make it.

But Asel instinctively knew what he had to do.

It was a feeling like blinking his eyes. An action that he could do naturally even though he had not learned it. He just didn't know it because he hadn't tried to do it before, but not now. He tried, recognized, and understood.

He goes through recognition. He holds the Mana that is swirling around him in place. He changes the direction of the fixed Mana and slowly sends it towards his body. There was no resistance in the process. There was only the pleasure and coolness of accepting what had to be accepted.

Wooong.

Intangible Mana passes through the skin and settles in the blood vessels and nervous system throughout the body. It travels through the bloodstream and electrical signals, passing through the heart and brain.

Mana rotates around the whole body. Impurities that had been gnawing at his body are excreted as sweat. Dead blood regurgitates from his mouth. But there was no pain. Asel spat the blood onto the floor, but still focused all his senses on Mana. In this way, he easily skips the process that requires the most caution when creating a Mana Core.

Two laps. He found the optimal space for Mana to settle.

Heart. He concentrates all the Mana on that organ, which beats and spreads blood throughout the body. Originally, the body's Mana rejection should have occurred in the process, but Asel's body did not cause any rejection. As if something he already had was flowing, Mana moved gently without rampaging.

The moved Mana all gathered in the heart. Asel adjusted the gathered Mana into the right shape. The inside was empty, and the outside was a solid sphere. Mana completed the shape in an instant according to Asel's will.

......Did I succeed?

Asel took a long breath and had that thought, the constructed Mana Core took root deep within Asel's body and inner self. He had not only finished building the Core, but also stabilized and settled it.

In the next moment, the Mana that had been swirling around Asel began to rush madly towards his Core. It was as if it was being sucked in.

The Mana was all converted into Mana in the process of moving towards Asel's Core. Asel didn't even need to worry about it. Mana changed its nature on its own and became pure Mana, settling deep within the Core.

After a few minutes, Asel felt that the Core was full of Mana and took a long breath.

"Hoo......"

Mana faintly laced his exhaled breath. A portion of the Mana that couldn't enter the Core Reactor was leaking out. It seemed his total Mana capacity wasn't yet high enough to contain all the Mana swirling around him. Considering he had just created it, that was only natural. There was no reason to be disappointed.

Asel thought so and slowly opened his eyes.

"……Huh."

Three pairs of eyes met Asel's gaze head-on. Asel gasped in surprise, and seeing him like that, the three people each showed their own reactions.

"……."

"……I'm speechless."

"Why, what's wrong? Is something wrong with our brother? Is he sick?"

Ena was silent. Hailey let out a hollow laugh, and Evelyn wrung her hands, her eyes darting around with an anxious look.

Asel stared at them for a moment, then opened his mouth towards Ena, who was standing with a serious expression.

"……Did I do something wrong?"

Ena, who had kept her mouth shut for quite a while even after Asel's question, knelt down to meet his eyes and continued speaking.

"Hailey suddenly came to find me, and I wondered what was going on… You've committed an outrageous act in that short amount of time."

"……."

"Do you even know how dangerous it is to create a Mana Core by yourself? You could end up dying, frantically pouring blood from every hole in your body. There are many cases where people become disabled because they can't control the rejection. I don't want to lose a disciple like that."

"……I'm sorry."

"Okay. From now on, until you become a proper mage, when you're about to do something like this, even if you're sure you can do it, ask me first. That's the only way I can guarantee your safety."

Ena said, placing her hand on Asel's cheek.

"But… I have to give you credit where it's due."

"……."

"You made it well. There's not a single sign of instability for a Mana Core of a mage who has just obtained their rank."

Ena smiled brightly and lightly stroked Asel's hair.

"Good job."

"……Thank you."

"Yeah."

Asel wore an awkward smile at Ena's warm gaze directed at him.

"I'll have to change the lesson plan a little."

Her eyes were filled with undisguised favor and delight.

# 9 - Witch's Meeting

The day after building the Mana Core.

Before lunchtime, Asel went out to Wiheim's downtown with Ena.

Evelyn was learning the mansion's work from Hailey, so she couldn't come with them. She wasn't interested in magic, so she stayed at the mansion without any regrets. Thanks to that, Asel felt a little more comfortable.

"……."

"Ooh……."

Asel followed Ena, who was walking ahead, and looked around the downtown area.

Mana-powered vehicles roamed the neatly paved roads. Transportation that moved using only Mana as its power source, without carriages. All the passenger had to do was control the direction and speed, making it easy to use even without learning how to ride a horse. It was a common means of transportation in Wiheim, where magic engineering was developed.

Golems were also actively moving around the streets. Their forms varied from ordinary stones to those made of elements like fire and water. Most of them were transporting materials needed for magic or research.

Their speed wasn't very fast, but considering the number and weight of the items they were carrying, they were definitely excellent carriers. Humans couldn't do that. Unless they were people who had awakened Aura.

'But such people wouldn't be doing transportation work.'

Asel chuckled at the thought. Then, Ena turned around and opened her mouth.

"Disciple, do you remember why we came out today?"

"Ah, yes. I remember."

Asel nodded and replied.

Yesterday, the day he built the Core Reactor. After dinner, Ena called Asel out separately and told him in advance that they would go out together tomorrow.

There were two purposes in total. One was to get a membership certificate from the Witch Council, and the other was to find out his Mana's nature affinity. Both were quite interesting to Asel. Among them, Asel was more interested in the Mana's nature affinity.

He understood that the Witch Council was a great group. He had read a book about the Witch Council yesterday. He had already ingrained in his mind how deep its history was and how many achievements and great people it had produced. He also understood that it was an honor to belong to such a place.

But that was it. Even if he understood it in his head, his heart was calm. Perhaps because he had only just dipped his toes into the society of magicians, his heart didn't flutter so much when he heard that he would become a member of the Witch Council. Maybe it was because he was only licking the surface with shallow knowledge.

On the other hand, the Mana affinity test made his heart swell just by hearing about it.

'All existing magic is greatly influenced by the Sorcerer's affinity.'

The most popularly known elemental magic, magic that walks the path of heresy, including corpse magic and black Sorcery. And various unique magic, including lightning magic. All these magic cannot be learned just because you want to learn them. The magic that can be learned depends on which type of magic the Sorcerer has a good affinity for.

For example, if Mana has a good affinity with fire, it is easy to learn Scorching Flame magic, and if it goes well with water, it is easy to learn Water Flow Magic. The power and efficiency of magic are also very excellent.

It is not impossible to learn other types of magic. However, the limits of achievement that can be obtained are clear, and the hierarchy that can be built becomes significantly lower. Therefore, most magicians tend to learn magic of a system that goes well with their Mana nature.

However, unique magic is a little different. This strange magic system is influenced by various factors such as the nature of Mana, as well as individual Imagery, talent, and environment. The lightning magic that Ena learned is also the same.

'What am I?'

If possible, I hope it's the lightning system. Asel thought so and moved his steps.

"Let's stop by the Witch Council first, have lunch, and then go to take the nature test. Is that okay?"

"Yes. You can do whatever is convenient for you, Master."

"Then let's do that. Is there anything you want to eat?"

"Anything but moldy garbage."

"……I'll choose it myself."

Ena looked at Asel with pitiful eyes and stroked his head. Asel realized that he had made a mistake and smiled bitterly. He should have just talked about any food. He didn't mean to make her worry.

"Let's just have steak. I know a place that does it well."

"Yes. Sounds good."

They continued to walk, sharing small talk. After a while, the two arrived in front of a huge building.

A building that stretched out more to the side than upwards. Countless windows were attached to the exterior walls of the building, and a lightning rod was embedded on the pointed roof.

A black cat was sitting at the front door. Unlike ordinary cats, it was wearing a witch's hat for cats on its head.

Nom's yellow eyes revealed a deep, indelible wisdom. The cat licked its hand and washed its face, then threw its gaze at Ena, who was approaching. Then, it smiled brightly and straightened its body.

"Ena!"

Human words popped out of the cat's mouth. Asel's eyes widened at the unbelievable sight, and Ena opened her mouth without any particular reaction, as if she was used to it.

"It's been a while, Bell. How have you been?"

"I've been good. What about you? You went to catch that bastard Zervil. Did you catch him?"

"I missed him, unfortunately."

"Bullshit!"

The cat, called Bell, opened its mouth as if hissing and jumped into Ena's arms. Ena skillfully accepted her.

"You missed that bastard? You could kill him with just a flick of your finger?"

"He was hiding in the slums of the kingdom, so I couldn't just fire magic indiscriminately. He also took hostages."

"Ha! He was hiding in such a place on purpose. You son of a bitch. I knew it when he was walking around smelling like corpses. Hostages are exactly what that bastard would do. It's not like a street vendor, what is a noble magician doing?"

Bell clicked her tongue and crawled onto Ena's shoulder. Ena gently stroked her back and turned her head towards Asel. Asel, who was staring blankly at Bell with a dazed expression, came to his senses and approached her at that blue gaze.

"I'm sorry. I was a little surprised……."

"It's okay. Everyone is like that when they see Bell for the first time."

"Am I some kind of monster? Why are you treating me like that?"

Bell bit Ena's shoulder weakly, as if complaining at Ena's words. Then, she looked at Asel and narrowed her eyes sharply.

"So, who is this milk-smelling kid? Why are you bringing him around?"

"Hasn't the rumor spread?"

"What rumor? You're just overthinking it."

"Hmm, is that so?"

Ena left the wriggling Bell alone and looked down at Asel, pausing for a moment. Then, she smiled and lightly stroked his hair, saying.

"He's my disciple."

"?"

Bell's expression twisted strangely at Ena's words. Ena raised the corners of her lips slightly and said once again.

"This is my disciple, Asel. Say hello, Asel. This is Bell, a mutant Sorcerer belonging to the Witch Council."

"Ah, hello. Ms. Bell. I'm Asel."

Asel politely greeted the cat with a dazed expression. Bell looked down at Asel's crown, then suddenly struggled and escaped from Ena's arms. Ena readily let her go.

"Meow!"

She landed on the ground and made a cat's cry, stiffly raising her tail upwards. Asel realized that the action was a kind of incantation. The Mana's wave that started from Bell's tail soon wrapped around her entire body. With a cracking sound, the cat's body instantly returned to human form.

Shorter than Ena. Purple bobbed hair grown to her shoulders. She was a girl with impressive cat-like, sharp eyes and golden eyes trembling within them. She looked at Asel and opened her mouth in surprise, then immediately turned her body and ran inside the Witch Council building.

While shouting.

"A lightning-crazed magician brought a successor! The sky will be torn apart again! Kyaaaaak!!"

"Still noisy as ever."

Ena smiled as she watched Bell's retreating figure.

"Let's go, Asel."

"……Yes."

Asel replied with a sullen expression. Ena tapped his forehead with her finger and slowly began to walk into the building. Asel followed her.

As they entered the building, a strong smell of books and wood lingered at the tip of their noses. The smell of women's perfume and all kinds of reagents penetrated through it. He didn't know until he crossed the door, but he felt it as soon as he crossed it. It seemed that they had made it so that people outside couldn't notice what was happening inside.

'Is it a barrier? I didn't feel any Mana…….'

Asel frowned and turned his head in all directions.

When he entered the building, he could feel the thick afterglow of Mana. The air he breathed contained a strong Mana, and the floor, walls, and ceiling were all covered with magic and Mana. He hadn't felt any of these things outside. It was a strange thing for Asel, who was sensitive to Mana and Mana.

"The external and internal spaces are disconnected, but I can't feel any traces of magic. It seems that they used a different Formula than magic."

"You noticed."

Ena looked at Asel with a surprised expression and said.

"When this building was first built, a Sorcerer was invited as an outside person. That person separated the space at the request of the elders. I heard it was a delicate task that required a month of attention to Sorcery."

"I guess they weren't here."

"Yeah. I'm often out."

Asel nodded and raised his gaze upwards.

One of the books flying in the air landed accurately on Asel's hand as he reached out.

It was a book titled <Revised Edition of Witch Council Scorching Flame Magic>. Asel slowly read the book and opened his mouth.

"Even if it's Sorcery, I know that Formula that deals with space is rare, so it seems that he was a fairly high-level Sorcerer."

"He was a Sorcerer who built the 7th Circle. He was also old. He must have learned at least one space Sorcery."

"Does such a person have to spend a month unfolding the Formula?"

[This book is a revision of the Scorching Flame magic of the Ignis Magic Tower into a form similar to the unique magic handled by the Witch Council, and is very different from ordinary elemental magic.]

"Most people who deal with space are like that. Not only Sorcerers, but also warriors."

"Is the time the same?"

"Time is more difficult. There are probably no time Sorcerers alive today."

[The Scorching Flame magic covered in this book does not rely solely on firewood and embers in the Core Reactor, but can comprehensively use external Mana and Mana, physical flames, embers, and flames spread by the Sorcerer. As such, it requires a very high level of Mana control, suppression, affinity, and a fluid Mana circuit. If even one of these is lacking, give up quickly.]

"By the way, how far are we going? I think we've walked quite a bit……."

"Just a little further."

[The following is basic Scorching Flame magic. If you can use this magic easily, you can learn the next magic and the magic concepts covered in this book. If it is impossible or difficult to manifest the magic, close the book and get some more sleep.]

"I don't see many people on the way."

"Most of them are on business trips or stuck in their own laboratories and don't come out. In the first place, not many people come to the Witch Council building…… what are you doing?"

"Yes?"

Asel asked back. Ena pointed at Asel's hand with a serious face and said.

"That…… what is that."

"Are you talking about this? It's a book titled Revised Edition of Witch Council Scorching Flame Magic. I happened to pick it up and read it."

"Not that. The one in the other hand."

"Ah, are you talking about this?"

Asel raised the hand that was not holding the book with an indifferent expression.

Red flames were dancing on his wrist. A spark that eats not only the Sorcerer's Mana but also the Mana and Mana wandering outside, and uses them as firewood.

"It's magic called Scorching Flame. I tried using it because it was in the book."

"……How?"

"Oh, um……."

Asel hesitated for a moment, then scratched his head and replied in a small voice.

"……Just? I just did it and it worked."

Ena was speechless.