# 10 - Witch Meeting (2)

Whoosh.

The flame blooming on his hand incinerates the surrounding air. Hot heat radiates in all directions, and the books flying around Asel hurriedly flee elsewhere. Only the flame grimoire held in his hand remained unscathed.

Ena frowned at the sight.

'He obtained the Core Reactor yesterday. And he's using magic without even going through the stabilization process.'

She was dumbfounded even thinking about it. How could that be possible?

Mages must fundamentally undergo a stabilization process for their Core Reactor. Asel's Core Reactor had just formed, yet its stability was no different from that of a skilled mage. No, in some ways, it even surpassed them. The conductivity, absorption rate, purity, and flow of Mana far exceeded those of ordinary mages.

But that doesn't mean he can skip the stabilization process. Even if it looks fine on the surface, there are incomplete parts when you delve into the deeper regions that only the Electromancer knows. If you use magic in that state, not only the Core Reactor but also the Electromancer will explode like a bomb. In the literal sense.

And yet…

"Master?"

Ena chuckled as she watched her disciple further amplify the size of the flame.

Flame magic rooted in the Ignis Magic Tower. The magic Asel was using was, in a way, a different type of magic, having modified that flame magic into a branch of unique magic. It was difficult to use, and if mishandled, it could turn the user into firewood, burning them along with the master, yet he was conjuring the flames very naturally.

A mage who had just built a Core Reactor, without any stabilization process.

'……I'm getting tired of being surprised.'

Ena thought so as she exhaled a long breath.

She already knew that Asel was exceptionally talented. Even if another talent suddenly emerged here, it wouldn't evoke the same emotion as before. It was surprising, but that was it. She simply felt joy as a master that her disciple was outstanding.

"Asel. Do you feel any resistance to the manifestation of magic?"

Erasing her thoughts, Ena asked that first.

For a mage, the change in properties was extremely important.

The number of magic types a mage can use is determined by their affinity for a particular attribute. High-ranking mages can use other types of magic regardless of affinity, but even then, it's only basic magic, and they feel resistance every time they manifest it.

Unique magic operates on a slightly different concept, but the magic Asel activated was based on flame magic. If he didn't have an aptitude for the flame attribute, it would be fundamentally impossible to use. Asel might be able to manifest magic that doesn't suit him with his excellent Mana control. Ena asked with that in mind.

But Asel shook his head as if he felt no resistance at all.

"I feel nothing."

"Okay, that's a relief."

Ena nodded and said.

"It seems your aptitude is for flame magic. There's no need to conduct an aptitude test."

"Ah… is that so."

Asel extinguished the flame in his hand, openly displaying his disappointment.

All the heat radiating into the remnants of the extinguished flame vanished with just a clench of his fist. He brushed off the embers on his fingertips and looked at Ena with a bitter smile.

"I was hoping it would be Electromancy."

"I was hoping for that too. If it were Electromancy, I could teach you directly. But if it's flame… it's better to learn magic from someone else. I'll teach you the basic magic system, though."

"Is there no possibility that I might also have an aptitude for Electromancy?"

At Asel's question, Ena pondered for a moment before opening her mouth.

"It's not impossible. It's possible if you're a dual-attribute holder."

"How can I find that out?"

"By taking an aptitude test, or by using magic like you just did. One of the two."

"Hmm…"

As soon as Asel heard Ena's words, he began to glare at the books that were starting to gather around him again. He was looking to see if there were any books related to Electromancy. Ena chuckled at the sight.

"All the books related to Electromancy are in my library. As the only Electromancer on the continent, I'm in charge of storing them."

"Ah…"

"Are you impatient?"

Ena asked in a soft voice. Asel nodded with an embarrassed expression.

"A little."

"Don't worry. I'm planning to conduct an aptitude test today as scheduled. Who knows, you might have a talent for other types of magic, as you said. We have to check."

At Ena's words, Asel's expression relaxed as if he was relieved.

As they talked and walked, a huge hall appeared before them before long.

The walls and ceiling were finished with neat wood, and a thick Mana that couldn't be hidden seeped out from the floor. The chandeliers hanging from the ceiling were operated by magic, and fragments of Formula could be felt due to the magic used by the mages sitting in various places.

It felt like entering a den of mages. The reality wouldn't be much different.

Asel's eyes sparkled as he turned his head in all directions. He had seen a lot of magic since entering Wiheim, but this was the first time he had seen various types of magic so closely. Interest welled up on its own, and his Mana Core tingled.

Ena left Asel alone and strode towards the end of the hall. Asel slowly followed behind her.

There were more mages in the Witch Council's hall than he had expected. From young mages summoning spirits to play with to mages conjuring flames in their hands to smoke, mages holding crystal balls and imbuing them with all sorts of Formula, mages gathering together to discuss magic, and so on. Electromancers with various personalities cast glances at them and then looked away.

Asel happened to make eye contact with a young girl and bowed his head. Ena also looked like a girl on the outside, so he thought she might also be a mature mage.

"Hmph!"

But she didn't even accept his greeting, instead blushing and turning her head away with a snort. Asel narrowed his eyes at the absurd sight.

'She wouldn't have lasted long in the slums.'

A quick judgment. Asel lost interest in the girl and hurried to Ena's side.

"Where do I get the membership card?"

"Over there, her."

Ena pointed at someone with her hand.

It was a woman with a smoking pipe in her mouth. Her appearance was naive, as if she had just become an adult, but her atmosphere was not. An undeniable age and the composure that only a high-ranking mage could show flowed through her body.

She was a strong person at first glance. Asel nodded, feeling his Mana Core surge as soon as he saw her.

"Ena."

She smiled and called Ena's name. Ena waved her hand and approached her.

"It's been a while, Irina."

"Indeed. How long has it been?"

"I don't know."

"Actually, I don't know either."

Huff.

Irina said, exhaling the smoke from her pipe, and then cast her gaze towards Asel. Asel looked into her crimson eyes and bowed.

"Hello."

"Yes, hello. I don't know how many years it's been since a man entered here."

There were male mages in the Witch Council as well. But they couldn't stand the atmosphere of this place full of women and left a long time ago. Thanks to that, it had been a very long time since a man, especially a young boy, had set foot here.

Perhaps that's why Irina was quite interested in Asel. The fact that he was the protagonist of the story that Bell was running around and loudly talking about added to her interest. Her eyes were filled with Asel.

"I want to get a membership card."

But as Ena blocked her as if protecting Asel, what was reflected in Irina's eyes changed to Ena's expressionless face. Irina looked into her blue eyes for a moment, then chuckled and nodded.

"Is that the kid?"

"Yes. He's my disciple."

"I heard the story from Bell. I don't know if she replaced her vocal cords with an orc's, but she's been shouting loudly. Thanks to her, there's no one in the Witch Council who doesn't know that you've taken on a disciple."

Irina said that and waved her hand in the air, then asked Asel.

"Kid, what's your name?"

"My name is Asel."

"The gender must be male… how old are you?"

"I'm 12 years old."

"Young. But it's too late to learn magic. But well… our Ena must have had her reasons for taking you in."

Irina shapes Mana into a rectangular form. She trims the lines with the end of her pipe and records Asel's personal information inside.

"You've awakened Mana, right?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

Asel immediately conjured Mana onto his palm. Irina reached out her hand as if trying to tear off a part of that Mana mass and said.

"It's going to hurt a little. Endure it."

"Yes?"

It was before he could even recognize it. Irina quickly reached out her hand and tried to tear off a part of Asel's Mana.

No, to be exact, she was trying to tear it off. Asel's Mana remained unmoved despite Irina's gesture.

"?"

A question mark appeared on her face. She looked at Ena, who was standing quietly next to Asel, with a look that seemed to ask what was going on. Ena chuckled and whispered in Asel's ear.

"Give Irina a little bit of Mana."

"Ah, yes."

Asel nodded and tore off a tiny amount of the conjured Mana and handed it to Irina.

It was an extreme level of manipulation. The separation and distribution of Mana, which is absolutely impossible for a mage who has just entered magic. Irina's face went blank for a moment, but she quickly coughed and straightened her expression.

"Ahem. Thank you."

"Yes."

Irina received the Mana that Asel handed her and pushed it straight into her pipe. As she inhaled and exhaled the smoke in that state, Asel's Mana slipped into the rectangle along with the smoke. The remaining smoke adjusted the shape of the rectangle and filled the inside with gray.

"Done."

As soon as the gray filled it, the rectangle floating in the air trembled, then fell to the floor with a thud. Irina picked up the fallen object and threw it to Asel. It was a card the size of his palm. Asel skillfully received the card and examined its contents.

There was nothing particularly special written on it. Below the top, where the words "Witch Council Membership Card" were written in large letters, the end was written in small letters with the name, age, gender, and explanation of the Mana circuit. Asel tucked the membership card into his arms and bowed to Irina.

"Thank you."

"You're a very polite friend. I like you."

Irina said that and then stood up from her seat and threw her pipe into the air with a flick. At the same time, the pipe turned into smoke and disappeared. She roughly ruffled Asel's black hair and said.

"The issuance of the membership card is over, and now we have to put your name in the Witch Council's register. Ena, is it okay to do it right away?"

"Yes. I have to finish it quickly and go to the aptitude test."

"Ah, I have to do that too."

After a short conversation.

Irina led Asel to the corner of the hall.

In the corner, there was a blank piece of paper and a cube with a hole large enough for a finger to fit in.

"Just put your finger in there and think of your name. Any questions?"

"No."

"Good."

Irina nodded and pointed to the cube with her chin. Asel put his finger into the cube without hesitation.

Along with the sound of crushing, a tingling pain was felt at the tip of his finger. His face frowned at the unexpected pain, but he didn't pull his finger out. It was because he was surprised, but in fact, the pain was nothing. It wasn't enough to make a fuss.

The blood flowing with the throbbing pain dyed the transparent tube of the cube red. The blood moved as if flowing through a pipe, then suddenly stopped and began to gush out through a small hole at the top of the cube.

All of the small amount of blood came out of the cube. It drew a circle in the air and was sucked into the paper next to the cube as if it were being absorbed.

In an instant, the paper was stained with blood. But it wasn't scattered randomly. Asel noticed that the blood written on the paper drew his name and exclaimed.

"Is it Blood Magic?"

"That's right. There's a vampire among the elders. That person made it."

As soon as the blood on the paper with his name written on it hardened, it flew away somewhere. Asel took his finger out of the cube, following Irina's words that he could take his finger out. Surprisingly, there were no wounds.

A method of extracting blood without making wounds. Asel thought that this was probably also a type of Blood Magic.

"Good. Ena, it's all over."

Irina said that and turned her head towards Ena. Ena, who was surrounded by other mages including Bell, became a pure white lightning bolt and instantly arrived in front of Asel. She gently stroked Asel's head and nodded.

"Did it hurt?"

"It was bearable."

"That's a relief."

Ena smiled softly. Irina, who watched the scene, frowned as if she was slightly disgusted.

"You… are you really Ena? You usually only answer in monosyllables with an expressionless face, but you smile in front of your disciple."

"Don't slander me."

"I'm going crazy."

Irina shook her head with a bitter smile. Then she looked at the gathered mages and continued.

"Everyone is probably very interested in you. You suddenly took on a disciple when the elders told you to train a successor, but you ignored them."

"It's not my fault that there's no one who catches my eye."

"Yes, that's probably true. So there will be a lot of attention on your disciple. They'll be curious about what kind of person catches your eye. They might try to take Asel away from you."

"Tell them to do that if they want to die."

Ena spat out in a coldly lowered voice. Irina answered as if she was absurd.

"……You know that killing is impossible between members of the Witch Council, right? Unless you're messing with a demon."

"I don't care."

"Let's not do that. I think you'd really do that."

Ena clicked her tongue and put her hands on both of Asel's shoulders.

"Anyway. We're done here, so I'm leaving."

"Just do the aptitude test here. Letitia is here now too."

"Then I will."

"Your conversation is so boring. Be cute. How long are you going to live as a virgin?"

"I'll take care of it."

Ena said that and turned her body away.

Irina shook her head and shouted.

"Letitia is on the opposite side!"

"……."

Ena turned her body again.

# 11 - Aptitude Test

Letitia's room was located at the left end of the building. Ena silently walked to her room, and Asel intently read the Scorching Flame Grimoire.

The most basic fire magic, Scorching Flame. From the magic that creates that flame, to creating a sea of fire or shaping it into a sword, the Formula were written in the book. Asel tried using some of the lower-level magic first.

Fortunately, the magic activated without much difficulty. It moved as he willed, and he could slightly change its shape to make it elongated or round. Because he was controlling the shape with Mana manipulation alone, without the aid of Formula, the amount of Mana consumed was quite large, but the recovery rate was even faster, so there was no problem.

'It seems like intermediate magic would be difficult.'

Various combat magic, including fire magic, consume a lot of Mana as much as their destructive power. Lower-level magic was okay, but intermediate-level magic seemed difficult. In the first place, the nature, shape, characteristics, and effects of Mana are all different, so it is difficult to manifest it by simply projecting Mana recklessly.

Moreover, Imagery is somewhat necessary from intermediate magic onwards.

In the end, this meant that the magic he could currently use was limited to the lower-level system.

However, Asel continued to manifest only lower-level magic without any particular dissatisfaction. After all, the rest was a matter of time. If he learned from his teacher and continued his research alone, he would reach that point before long. Asel was sure of it.

"We're here."

Ena said after walking for a while. She muttered, knocking on the door with 'Letitia Berkias' written in large letters.

"Letitia, it's me."

The reaction was immediate.

"...Ena?"

A clear voice was heard from beyond the door. Then the door burst open.

Letitia's figure was visible through the open door.

Gray hair that came down to her waist. Dark circles were visible under the round glasses she was wearing. The white gown she was wearing looked like a high-quality one at a glance, and her light black eyes were full of intelligence.

She looked like a scholar at a glance. Ena waved lightly at Letitia.

"Hello. I came for an aptitude test."

"...Your way of getting straight to the point is still the same."

Letitia sighed deeply and said that. Asel and Ena followed her suggestion to come inside.

Her room looked like a laboratory. All sorts of metals and Mana conductors were rolling around on the desk, and boxes were filled with internal organs of unknown monsters and Mana Engines. Various reagents were also hung on the wall as if they were on display. Asel opened his mouth at the spectacle of mysteries.

"How have you been?"

Letitia left Asel, who was looking around the room, alone and sat down, asking Ena. Ena picked up a cookie on the table and nodded.

"So-so."

"That's good. I thought you burned down a city because you didn't like it."

"...What do you think of me?"

"Isn't it true?"

Letitia chuckled and put her hand in her pocket. Asel's figure, poking a wriggling monster's heart with his finger, was reflected in her eyes.

"That's him? Your disciple. Bell was making a fuss about it."

"Yeah. I'm going to do an aptitude test."

"It's a must-have course for wizards who take on disciples. What's the price? Gold coins? Or a favor?"

"Is ten gold coins enough?"

"That's enough."

Ena nodded and took out ten gold coins and handed them to Letitia. Letitia checked the number of gold coins she received, stood up from her seat, and brought out a crystal ball of a suitable size.

Blue Mana swirled inside the transparent crystal ball. Letitia calmed the rampaging Mana and called Asel, who was loitering in front of the cage where small monsters were trapped.

"Hey, kid. Come here."

"Ah, yes."

Asel immediately turned around and approached Letitia. Only then could Letitia see Asel's face properly.

"...He'll be worth seeing when he grows up?"

"Pardon?"

"It's nothing. Let's do the test."

Letitia moved slightly to the side and pulled the crystal ball in front of Asel. Asel sensed the Mana in the crystal ball that had settled down quietly and pursed his lips.

'I think I can wake it up.'

If he simply interfered, he could make the Mana in the crystal ball rampage. But for some reason, he felt like he shouldn't, so he kept quiet.

"I'm going to start the aptitude test now. What you have to do is simple. Put your hand on the crystal ball and insert a little Mana into the crystal ball, and your Mana will automatically connect with the Mana in the crystal ball. Then, just say the scene that comes to your mind. Easy, right?"

Asel nodded. He looked at Ena once, and after confirming that she was smiling, he turned his gaze back to Letitia.

"Can I do it right away?"

"Do whatever you want."

"Then I'll do it right away."

There was no reason to hesitate. Asel immediately placed his palm on the crystal ball and slowly raised his Mana.

A portion of the Mana that was activated in an instant was separated. He put it into the crystal ball. At the same time as the sound of water droplets falling into his head, the Mana in the crystal ball roughly wrapped around Asel's Mana.

The swirling Mana gradually rose and reached the place where Asel had placed his palm. At that moment, Asel realized that the Mana in the crystal ball was trying to interfere with his Mana system. He could stop it if he wanted to, but Asel willingly accepted the neat Mana.

A hot yet cool sensation ran from his palm to his brain.

"Close your eyes."

Letitia's order. He accepted it without resisting.

His vision went dark.

"Tell me what you see first in the dark, and what you hear first."

He understood. Asel concentrated to feel something while remaining silent.

In that state, something popped out of the darkness in less than a second. It was a flash of dark blue light. As soon as he recognized it, the flash became a huge thunderbolt and tore through the darkness. The belated thunder shook his consciousness.

"Lightning struck."

"Already? It's faster than I thought. Is it compatible with lightning magic? Like Ena's disciple—"Flames are spreading.""

"...Is it a dual attribute? It's been a long time since I've seenㅡ

"Water is pouring over the fire. Uh... the water immediately freezes and makes the sky and the ground all ice."

"?"

Letitia's face twisted strangely each time Asel spoke.

"...What is he saying?"

"Wind is blowing and all the ice is gone. Flowers bloom between the wind and a flower field is created. Something that looks like a spirit is running around on it, and the corpses get up and run away."

"..."

"Uh? Something is being decomposed and assembled on its own. Bombs are exploding and black waves and shadows are approaching from afar. An earthquake is happening, and trees are being uprooted and flying around on their own."

"Stop, stop!"

"Yes? Strange things keep coming out? Should I stop?"

"Yes... I know now, so stop."

"Yes..."

Asel pursed his lips in regret, opened his eyes, and took his hand off the crystal ball. When he turned his head, he saw Letitia sitting on a chair, pressing her forehead. She looked tired at a glance. Asel wondered if he had done something wrong, so he rolled his eyes and looked around.

"Asel."

Then, Ena called his name. Asel was startled and quickly turned his head.

"Yes, yes?"

"I'm so proud of you."

"...? Thank you?"

"Yes, yes. I'm grateful too."

Ena smiled happily and hugged Asel tightly. Without knowing why, Asel tilted his head and entrusted himself to Ena's arms.

Compared to her small body, her embrace was quite warm.

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When they finished the test and came out, it was almost lunchtime. Asel and Ena immediately went to the restaurant and finished their meal. As Ena guaranteed, the steak at the restaurant was very delicious. Much better than the food Hailey made. It was only natural since it was the food of a chef who had professionally learned to cook.

After finishing their meal, they looked around the streets for a while and returned to the mansion. As soon as Ena passed through the main gate, lightning struck the lightning rod on the roof of the mansion as if welcoming the owner. Asel frowned as he looked at the lightning strike.

'I've figured out that I have an aptitude for lightning magic.'

That meant that someday he would be able to use such magic.

It wouldn't be long. Asel reaffirmed this and followed Ena into the mansion.

"Asel! You're here!"

Evelyn, dressed in a neat maid uniform, greeted him as he entered the hall. Cute clothes full of frills. Evelyn grabbed the hem of her skirt and spun around, as if she liked the clothes she was wearing.

"How is it, how is it? Cute, right? Does it suit me?"

"It suits you well. Is it worth learning the mansion work?"

"No problem! It's much easier than touching animal or monster organs!"

Evelyn shouted, raising her thumb. Asel chuckled and told her that he was glad. Evelyn nodded vigorously and greeted Ena, who was standing next to Asel.

"Ah, you're back. Ena."

"Yeah. Are you getting a good education?"

"Yes! Hailey is teaching me well. Thanks to her, I don't have any difficult tasks yet!"

"Okay. I'll give you this month's salary tomorrow."

"Salary?"

Evelyn's eyes widened. She waved her hands and shouted with a look of horror.

"I don't need money! It's enough to let me live here!"

"I'll give it to you anyway. It doesn't matter if you don't want it."

"Ena...!"

"Live while doing what you want with it. I won't interfere as long as you don't go down a strange path."

"...Can I call you Mom?"

"Go away."

Ena gestured to Evelyn. Evelyn disappeared over the stairs following the gesture. Asel chuckled at the sight of her flying away while screaming with a laughter-filled voice. It had only been a day since she came to the mansion, but it seemed that she had adapted to some extent while living with Hailey.

It was a good thing. Asel held the Scorching Flame Grimoire he had brought from the Witch Council's library in his hand and turned to Ena.

"Teacher, what should I do now?"

"Rest for now. We'll start magic training in earnest from tomorrow. Ah, before that."

Ena smiled softly and snapped her fingers. Then, lightning flashed on her palm, and a blue book appeared. Ena handed the book to Asel. Asel checked the title of the book he received and widened his eyes.

<You Can't Do It. Introduction to Lightning Magic>

"It's an introduction to lightning magic as the title says. You can read it, but don't use magic. Lightning magic is focused on destructive power even among special magic, so if you use it wrong, your body will split apart in the shape of the nervous system."

A creepy word. Asel nodded with a bitter smile.

"I understand. I will do that."

"Okay. And from tomorrow, I'm going to tell you the meaning of the letters in the Formula, but if you want to study in advance, you can take out a book from the library and read it. Enter and exit as you please."

"Yes. Thank you."

"Okay. Then rest."

Ena stroked Asel's head once and went up to her room. Asel also returned to his room and stretched out.

He felt a satisfying comfort when he entered the room. It had not been a day since he came to this mansion, but he already seemed to think of this place as his home.

It wasn't a bad feeling. Asel drank the water in the water bottle that Hailey seemed to have brought, sat at his desk, and lined up the books he had brought.

There were two books in total. The Scorching Flame Grimoire he brought from the Witch Council and the Lightning Grimoire that Ena gave him. Asel hesitated for a moment, then slowly indulged in the Scorching Flame Grimoire he had been reading.

He understood the characteristics of fire magic and the characteristics that had been changed by revising it as special magic.

He practiced the basic magic, Scorching Flame, several times to get a feel for it. He repeatedly used other magic classified as lower-level magic and went through the process of getting used to the magic.

When his Mana was almost exhausted, Asel yawned and closed the book.

'How many hours have passed?'

He pressed his throbbing forehead and checked the time, and the hour hand had long since entered the early morning hours. It was the price he paid for focusing on the book without knowing the time.

Tiredness weighed down on his body.

Asel got up from his seat, stretched out, and took out his identification card from his pocket and placed it on the desk. When he saw the gray rectangle, he felt that he had officially entered the magic society. He smiled faintly, tidied up his desk, and lay down on the bed.

The night sky visible just before closing the curtains was full of stars. Asel admired the stars for a moment, then closed the curtains and lay down on the bed.

That's how the day passed.

# 12 - Academy?

As soon as the morning broke, Asel and Ena began their training in the library. Ena took out only the necessary books from the hundreds lined up on the shelves and placed them in front of Asel.

“These are the characters used in the formulas. Memorize them.”

“Understood.”

The books Ena handed over totaled ten. It was far too much material to cover in a short time. However, Asel gathered all the books without showing any signs of dislike and settled into a corner of the library. Ena stayed by his side, waiting for him to finish reading.

Time passed. Excluding sleeping and meal times, Asel focused solely on reading, and as a result, he managed to read all ten books within a week.

Reading them all was not the ultimate goal; the objective was to memorize all the characters, but Asel had no significant issues with that.

“What does this character mean?”

“It means expansion. It’s used to increase or amplify the range of magic.”

“And this one?”

“It means delay. It’s a character used to determine when the magic will activate based on how much mana is infused. It’s effective for magic that is used with a time lag.”

“What about this one?”

“It means autonomy. It’s part of the formula for magic that operates by thinking and judging on its own.”

Ena answered every question without hesitation. After confirming that he had memorized all the characters from the books, she moved on to the next stage.

“I’ll teach you the basics of magic.”

The second session was a lecture. Asel sat in a chair, recalling memories from his past life as he watched Ena standing on a podium explaining.

It felt like he had seen a professor lecturing in a place called ‘university’ like that. It was not a bad feeling. Asel focused on Ena’s lecture.

The lecture on the basics of magic was mostly knowledge-based. There were not many opportunities to actually use magic. Most of the time, it involved using magic without any change in properties, and the rest was just sitting and taking notes.

“Magic is a miracle manifested through mana. There are many types, and those called Grand Sorcerers often develop original magic. The Grand Sorcerer of Electromancy is Cromwell, but he is no longer around. He died a thousand years ago.”

“......”

“Just because you learned the same magic doesn’t mean you can project the same power. Depending on the sorcerer’s capabilities, lower-tier magic can sometimes exhibit the power of higher-tier magic.”

“Can you do it, Master?”

“If I concentrate.”

The lectures continued for about four months. During that time, Asel accumulated a wealth of knowledge, starting from the history related to magic, how to read formulas, how to arrange characters, how to create formulas, and how to imbue properties into magic.

It was quite a meaningful achievement. Asel confirmed with a satisfied smile that the efficiency and power of the fire magic, which he had become so familiar with, had dramatically increased through Ena’s lectures.

Meanwhile, time continued to flow.

By the time Ena’s lectures ended, the season was already looking towards summer. It was then that Asel began to learn Electromancy from Ena in earnest.

There were a total of five books on Electromancy in Ena’s library. Considering that the books on other types of magic numbered in the hundreds, this was a very small amount, but most of the unique magic was in similar situations. Since few people used them, it was natural that the organized content was limited.

Moreover, Electromancy was a magic that no one had learned except for its creator, Cromwell, and Ena. Thinking about it that way, five books felt quite substantial.

“Have you read the introductory book?”

“Yes. I read it all the way through.”

Asel answered Ena’s question.

Currently, the two were standing in an open area behind the mansion. It was too dangerous to conduct magic training in the library where they usually held their lessons, so they had moved to this location. Here, it was easier to respond compared to the cramped library, and it was a suitable place for casting magic.

“What is the most basic spell of Electromancy?"It's called 'Bang-Rai' (Thunder)." It’s a spell that changes mana into an electric property and shoots it out.”

“Use it.”

Asel nodded, facing Ena, who had a serious expression.

He had read the book on Electromancy dozens of times. The same went for the other books, excluding the introductory one. The content of the books he had read repeatedly while wandering in and out of the library still lingered in his mind.

Raising his hand, he recalled the characteristics of Electromancy.

The activation speed was slower than light-based magic, but its power was double. It was classified as a type of destructive magic, but unlike other destructive magic, Electromancy had no recoil due to the uniqueness of its circuit. However, both the power and speed, as well as the delicacy in handling the force of lightning, relied solely on the sorcerer’s capabilities without the aid of a formula, making it impossible for ordinary individuals to even attempt.

This was Asel’s first time using it directly. He knew the theory through books, but he had refrained from using it at Ena’s request. Thus, changing mana into lightning, assembling the formula, and calculating the amount of mana were all firsts for him.

But…….

‘This is strange.’

Asel thought with a relaxed expression as he moved his mana.

Vroom.

The mana within the Core Reactor moved in an instant. As he used magic, the increased mana responded to his will, slowly changing its properties. In response, a circuit favorable for Electromancy was formed.

It was a circuit instinctively pieced together. A form of mana circuit that could be flexibly designed according to each type of magic. Through this innate talent, Asel could assemble any form of circuit he desired.

The same went for Electromancy. He felt that the circuit he was currently assembling for Electromancy was even more familiar than the circuits he had built for fire magic. Perhaps he was more suited for this. No, it was certain that he was.

“If you think it’s dangerous, stop. I’ll block the recoil.”

Ena’s words. Asel nodded, still with an indifferent expression.

He assembled the circuit and changed the properties of the mana. Without worrying about the order, the tasks were completed simultaneously, yielding results.

Crack.

He heard the sound of lightning sparking in his mind.

A smile naturally blossomed on his lips.

He manifested the magic simply by recalling the formula, without any incantation.

[Bang-Rai (Thunder Strike)]

Crack!

A dark blue lightning bolt shot out rapidly from Asel’s hand. The lightning, moving without any obstruction, struck a tree, creating a massive thunderous sound as it disappeared. Ena glanced at the tree, which had a gaping hole in the center and was beginning to tilt, and then smiled back at Asel, who was grinning at her.

It was the birth of the third Electromancer in history.

Time flowed like water. Seasons passed to the point where Asel could no longer count how many times they had repeated, and he finally reached the day of his adulthood.

Just like last year’s adult celebration party for Evelyn, this year, a party was held to celebrate Asel’s coming of age. However, while last year only the mansion’s residents attended, this year, several wizards from the Witch Council joined the celebration. They were all individuals connected to Ena or had formed new connections with Asel.

After receiving most of his education from Ena, Asel often visited the Witch Council’s library to indulge in books or attended magic exchange meetings, where he managed to build quite a few connections.

In a way, it was only natural. Asel, who had grown up without any change in his childhood appearance, had long since become a famous figure in the Witch Council, where women made up the majority. Unlike his notoriously difficult master, he communicated well and was receiving the affection of many young sorceresses.

There were even those who attempted to seduce him physically to gain his interest or affection. Of course, they were somewhat restrained by their masters, but still, many were struggling to catch Asel’s attention.

The same was true at this party.

“It’s been a while, Asel! How have you been?”

“Oh, Hera. I’ve been well. You look even prettier all dressed up.”

“Ugh…… Ahem. Thank you. This is a gift to celebrate your coming of age. Will you accept it?”

“……Is it a letter?”

“Yes! I also put some money inside! So, Asel! Will you please do magic research with me for the rest of our lives?!”

Hera’s confession, typical of a sorceress. Asel returned the letter with a wry smile and gently declined.

“I’m sorry. I’m not ready to be with someone yet. I’ll just accept your feelings.”

“Ah….”

At his clear expression of intent, Hera stood there as if her soul had left her body, then turned away in tears. Asel scratched the back of his head as he watched her hair flutter away. At that moment, Irina, who had a pipe in her mouth, chuckled and draped her arm over Asel’s shoulder.

“You’re quite popular, huh? How many girls have cried over you so far?”

“……I don’t know.”

“How can you not know how many there are?”

“Why are you asking something like that? It’s awkward.”

“It’s fun.”

Irina blew a puff of smoke into Asel’s face, laughing. Asel ignited a flame to consume the smoke and then gently slipped out of Irina’s embrace.

“They’re still young. I’m the only guy they see often, so they confuse interest and affection and make mistakes.”

“Some of them seem like they’ve lived for decades. You’re about the same age as them.”

Irina let out a hollow laugh, then pulled a glass of wine from the table with her magic and took a sip. Asel followed suit, drinking wine, and when he made eye contact with Evelyn, who was busily moving around the table, he waved at her with a smile. Evelyn also smiled back and waved.

Irina commented on that scene.

“You two siblings get along well.”

“We’ve relied on each other since we were young. There’s no way we wouldn’t get along. By the way, Irina, didn’t you have a meeting today? Why are you here?”

Asel asked while setting the wine he was holding down on the table.

Coincidentally, this year was the day of a meeting led by the alliance. There hadn’t been one last year, but due to the sudden meeting this year, Ena had left only to say congratulations and headed to the meeting hall. Yet Irina, who belonged to the same alliance, was sitting at the party, merely drinking wine instead of attending the meeting.

She had initially given off an aura of intimidation and mystery when Asel first met her, but after getting somewhat closer, her impression was completely the opposite. It was hard to believe she was the same person. Perhaps that was why Asel thought Irina had been expelled from the alliance and couldn’t attend the meeting.

“Oh, that.”

But the answer that came out was different from what he expected.

“It’s a meeting that doesn’t require my attendance. I can just vote or give my opinion briefly without having to go to the meeting hall.”

“But your master went.”

“Ena has to attend. The topic of this meeting is related to her.”

“What is it about?”

“It’s confidential.”

Irina chuckled and tapped Asel’s head with the end of her pipe.

“If you’re upset, aim for a higher position in the alliance.”

“……Is this what a Grand Sorcerer is?”

“Isn’t it impressive? I know.”

As Irina laughed, inhaling the smoke, she suddenly remembered something and exclaimed, turning to Asel.

“I think I can tell you this.”

“……?”

“Congratulations on your admission to the academy.”

“?”

As she said it with a smile, Asel’s face crumpled.

“According to the contract between the alliance and the Luminous Academy, now that you have just become an adult, one outstanding sorcerer must be admitted to the academy. The candidates are Asel, Ena’s disciple, and Kal, Quirum’s disciple. These two. The preliminary voting results show Asel with 25 votes and Kal with 3 votes.”

“…….”

“Even if everyone gathered here votes for Kal, it won’t be enough for him. I will confirm Asel’s admission to the academy.”

Bang, bang, bang.

The elderly sorcerer sitting at the end of the round table finished speaking and struck the table with a mana hammer. At the same time, a thunderous applause filled the room, and Ena, who stood up from her seat, summoned real thunder.

[Nae-Gung (Thunder Bow)]

Kwahhhhhh!!!!

In an instant, the walls of the meeting hall were shattered. Ena looked down at the silent attendees with a fierce gaze and muttered softly.

“No. I don’t want to.”

He’s my disciple.

Ena’s expression as she whispered was twisted with rage.

# 13 - Academy?(2)

Luminous Academy.

Built near the Empire's capital, it had already become a city and a symbol, the best educational institution on the continent.

As difficult as it was to get in, the number of jobs one could obtain after graduation was bizarrely high. Graduates were treated well wherever they went, and the academy was a prestigious school that most of the Empire's officials had passed through. There was a reason why nobles gritted their teeth and tried to get in.

And to such a place, they were sending a magician affiliated with the Witch Council.

To be precise, they were sending the most talented individual from Wiheim. The Witch Council or the Alliance didn't matter much. It just so happened that the most outstanding magician who had just come of age was Ena's disciple, who was affiliated with both the Witch Council and the Alliance. It wasn't a story brought up to torment her.

In the first place, various magician organizations had recently been sending young magicians to Luminous Academy. It was similar to studying abroad, meant to encourage them not to be confined to a well but to wander the outside world and form various relationships. It was a trend, if anything. The only difference was that the Alliance had been doing it for a long time.

It was thanks to a contract made between the first Leader and the Academy Dean.

It wasn't a huge incident. The Alliance asked the Academy Dean, who was on friendly terms with them, for help in building the city of Wiheim. In return, the Dean asked that if a young and excellent magician emerged, they should be allowed to enter the Academy.

It wasn't a difficult request, so the Leader readily agreed.

This promise, which started as a request and expanded into a contract, had continued to this day.

It was thanks to this that the relationship between the Academy and Wiheim wasn't so bad.

However, the current Leader had been feeling a slight sense of debt regarding this friendship until recently. For several years, no outstanding young magician had appeared to be sent to the Academy. The only magicians they had were old middle-aged men and women or elders. They might look young, but inside, they were all old people.

In such a situation, Asel appeared like rain during a drought. Although he hadn't spoken to him directly, the level of magic he used had already been confirmed at the exchange meeting between the Alliance and the Witch Council. The Leader thought that he was undoubtedly the most suitable talent for admission to the Academy.

So, he cast his vote, and Asel was chosen by an overwhelming margin.

It was a joyous occasion. The Leader felt like getting up and dancing, but as the position made the person, he maintained a solemn atmosphere and continued the meeting.

The result was this.

"……."

The Leader of the Alliance, Nom, met Ena's blue gaze and sighed deeply.

"Senior, why are you like this? This is a good opportunity for Asel."

It was a strange situation where an old magician was calling Ena, who looked like a young girl, "Senior." But no one expressed surprise at this fact. Instead, they swallowed hard or watched the current situation with fascinated eyes.

"Besides, he will eventually leave Wiheim and wander the world. Senior, you know how important it is for a magician to experience the outside world as soon as possible."

"That's for me to decide, not the Alliance."

"……Tsk. That's true, but still."

Nom muttered, frowning. It was certainly strange not to ask Ena, Asel's teacher, for her opinion on her disciple. He asked with a bright expression.

"Is it okay to send him?"

"Are you trying to mess with me?"

"This isn't working."

Nom threw away all the solemn atmosphere and returned to his usual self, jumping up from his seat. Those who had been watching the confrontation between Ena and Nom gasped with anticipation at the sight.

Both Ena and Nom were Archmages who had reached the 8th Circle. Both were classified as asymmetric forces wherever they went, and now they were facing each other in opposition.

"No, Senior. Aren't you being too overprotective? Other magicians give their disciples monster hunting as homework!"

"Do you think Asel needs that?"

"Well, no, but... Ah, then I'll ask the opposite. Is there anything more you can teach Asel?"

"A lot. I'll even teach him lightning magic directly."

"You know that if you interfere too much, Asel won't awaken his Uniqueness of magic. I trust you don't intend to limit your disciple's potential."

"……There's a lot more to teach him besides that."

"What is it? From what I've seen, his skills in handling circuits, Core Reactor, and Mana are all similar to ours."

"……Anyway, there's a lot."

"Ugh."

After a fairly long conversation, Nom shook his head with a tired expression and raised his finger.

The magicians swallowed at the simple gesture. They didn't think they would fight to the death here, but there was a possibility that force would be used. Conflicts of opinion among proud magicians often escalated into physical clashes.

The magicians stirred in anticipation of the battle.

But their expectations were spectacularly wrong. Instead of projecting Mana, Nom, who had stood up, pointed at Ena with his finger and headed out of the conference room.

The faces of the magicians who remained in their seats turned blank, and Ena's expression twisted. Nom looked at her and shouted loudly.

"Wait right there! I'll go ask Asel myself!"

"……What?"

"In the end, his own will is the most important thing!"

Crack.

Nom drew his extended finger vertically downwards. A crack formed in the space along with his gesture.

An 8th Circle Space Magician. A monster who had mastered space magic, which required extreme difficulty and talent, to its limits. He threw himself into the cracked fissure and disappeared from the conference room. Ena bit her lip tightly and threw herself over the shattered wall.

Rumble!!

A white lightning bolt split the sky above Wiheim.

"……."

"Shall we get something to eat?"

In the conference room where the Archmages had disappeared, everyone nodded at the words of one of the magicians who had been sitting quietly.

"Let's do that."

"I know a good place. I'll guide you."

"Then, I'll ask you to do so."

That day, a drinking party of high-ranking magicians took place on the streets of Wiheim.

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Crack!

The space next to where Asel was standing suddenly tore open. Asel was startled and unconsciously chanted a spell, reaching out his hand towards the opened space.

[Crimson Fire Fan]

The magic was completed in an instant. Flames that devoured everything and grew in size were fired in a fan shape.

Those attending the party screamed and stepped back at the sudden burst of fire. Skilled magicians narrowed their eyes sharply and drew up Mana, and Irina, who was standing next to Asel, exhaled a large amount of smoke from her throat. The smoke immediately changed shape into hundreds of daggers.

"Huh?"

Just as she was about to fire them into the fissure, Irina felt a familiar trace of Mana from the torn space.

She didn't need to think long. As far as she knew, there was only one magician who wielded space magic and had an unpleasant Mana.

Irina sighed and canceled the magic. The daggers that had turned back into smoke entered the end of her pipe, and she inhaled the smoke.

"Hmm."

At the same time, a face suddenly popped out from beyond the fissure.

It was a face covered in soot. Part of his braided white beard was burned black, and his cheeks and chin were red-hot. When he opened his mouth, black smoke billowed out. Asel's eyes widened as he identified the owner of the bizarre appearance.

"……Leader?"

"Long time no see, Asel. Cough, cough... Your magic is still quite powerful. If I hadn't used space distortion, my head would have been reduced to ashes. Hehe."

Nom smiled kindly and walked through the fissure.

With a snap of his fingers, his disheveled appearance returned to that of a neat magician. He stroked his beard and looked down at Asel.

"Congratulations on becoming an adult. Has it already been eight years since you came here?"

"……That's right. Time really flies."

Asel replied with an awkward smile.

Although he had encountered the Leader at the exchange meeting between the Witch Council and the Alliance three years ago, this was the first time they had spoken directly. Considering the other party's status and abilities, it was only natural to be nervous just talking to him.

Nom narrowed his eyes and asked.

"What Circle are you currently in?"

"6th Circle."

"Hmm, 6th Circle after only eight years of seriously learning magic? And you haven't even had any practical experience or enlightenment yet? You're a monster."

"It's thanks to having an overqualified teacher."

Asel said with a faint smile. Nom was chatting comfortably when he reacted to the word "teacher" that came out of Asel's mouth.

"Ah, that's right. Asel."

"……? Yes. What is it?"

"Are you thinking of entering Luminous Academy?"

"……The Academy?"

Asel muttered, glancing at Irina.

'So, this is what congratulating me on my admission meant.'

He left Irina, who was puffing on her pipe, behind and thought about Nom's proposal.

He knew Luminous Academy well. He had seen it in books, and he had occasionally talked to magicians from the Academy. He could confidently say that he had some knowledge of it.

However, the talk about admission was a different matter. He thought it was something that belonged to another world, but an unexpected opportunity had come his way.

'It doesn't seem so bad.'

It wasn't that he was tired of life in Wiheim. He hadn't had a single complaint while living here, and he cherished the relationships he had built here. He even felt more at home here than in the mountain village where he was born.

But he also wanted to leave Wiheim and wander the world.

Experience was as important to magicians as it was to warriors. Depending on how they lived and what they pursued, their Imagery and the Uniqueness of their Mana would change. It was the only commonality between Aura and Mana, and it was rooted solely in life and thought, not talent.

There was a reason why magicians often became mercenaries or wandering bards. Those who had some skill, were confident in their magic, and wanted to grow all left the cradle and walked the world. The growth limit of those who couldn't and settled for reality was significantly lower.

Asel was a special case. To be a 6th Circle magician just by eating, sleeping, and casting magic in Wiheim was something that magicians who had wandered the world would foam at the mouth and have a fit over.

A 6th Circle magician was a welcome talent anywhere. A VIP who could manifest high-level magic, easily use mid-level magic, and draw out low-level magic as naturally as breathing. Considering that the minimum requirement for the Academy's entrance exam was the 4th Circle, it was an overwhelmingly high level.

'But if I stay like this, it's impossible to reach the 7th Circle.'

From the 7th Circle onwards, it was the stage of imbuing Uniqueness by pounding Imagery directly into the magic, as well as having one's own unique magic system. The reason why Ena's white lightning was constantly raging was due to the manifestation of this Uniqueness. This was a level that could never be reached by sitting in a room and using magic.

Thump!!

Was it because he was thinking about Ena? He heard the sound of lightning striking from the top of the mansion. Asel looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then checked Nom's anxious expression and continued his thoughts.

'I have no intention of staying in the 6th Circle. My goal is the 8th Circle, or even higher.'

Having entered the world of magic and now with a constant interest, fun, and thirst for knowledge, Asel wanted to enter the 8th Circle, the realm of the Archmages, as well as the 9th Circle, which no one had reached except for those called "Sages." It was the realm of ideals that every magician dreamed of. It was the stepping stone to transcendence.

It was still a distant realm, but if he climbed the stairs step by step, it wasn't impossible to reach. He didn't know about the 9th Circle, but he felt like he could reach the 8th Circle if he rolled around for a few years. The 7th Circle came first, but Asel didn't pay much attention to the realm right in front of him.

It wasn't arrogance. It was confidence. He believed in his talent, and it had never betrayed him. It was definitely a Circle that he could reach in 5 years with research alone, or within 2 years if he rolled around outside. And even this was a rough estimate. It might even take less time.

He didn't even imagine it taking longer.

There was nothing more foolish than using his brain for something that was impossible.

'In the end, the cornerstone of everything is to gain experience.'

His continued thoughts reached their end.

Asel nodded and stared at Nom.

"Okay. I'll do it, admission."

"Good! You've thought it through very well!"

He would have thought about it eventually anyway. Unable to be satisfied with his current position, he would have left Wiheim in some form, whether as a mercenary or a Labyrinth explorer, for the sake of growth. It just so happened that the method was admission to the Academy.

"What should I do?"

Asel asked, and just as Nom was about to answer,

"Asel!"

Crack!!

A white lightning bolt struck next to Asel, and Ena appeared. She glared at Nom and conjured lightning in both hands.

"You damn bastard... Did you set up space distortion in the mansion?"

"Did I? Hehe, I'm getting old, so I don't remember well."

Nom replied nonchalantly, scratching his cheek. Ena gritted her teeth and took a step forward as if to protect Asel.

The intense anger that was hard to see from Ena, who usually had little emotional expression, was expressed outwards through her actions and Mana. Lightning mixed in the air, and Ena growled.

"Get lost. I'm done giving you leeway just because you're the Leader."

"Alright. I'll step back now. I've already heard the answer anyway."

"……What?"

At Nom's words, Ena turned to look at Asel. Asel swallowed hard at the fierce gaze. The sight of his angry teacher, whom he had never seen before, gave him quite a bit of pressure.

"I'm leaving. And Asel, I'll let you know the entrance exam schedule later."

With those words, Nom split the space and hid himself beyond it. But Ena didn't even glance at him, instead looking at Asel and pulling him close by the neck.

"Ugh."

"……."

Their eyes met right in front of each other. A close distance where they could feel each other's breath. It was a distance that would make one's heart flutter with excitement, but Asel's heart was pounding with fear.

"Th-Teacher?"

"……."

"……Ena?"

"……Come to my room tonight."

With those words, Ena released Asel and trudged back to her room. Asel didn't even think about fixing his disheveled clothes, instead staring at Ena's powerless back.

# 14 - Academy?(3)

The night sky of Wiheim was more beautiful than anywhere else on the continent.

Countless starlight was maintained more vividly through Stellar Rank Magic, and floating islands roamed throughout the night sky, scattering radiance. Starlight flowed everywhere, and magic expanded. It was a sight that anyone, whether a mage or not, would love.

A city famous as a tourist destination, though one couldn't just visit as they pleased.

The place where mages resided was so mysterious.

Although he had become somewhat accustomed to it, Asel still liked the night sky of Wiheim. There was no reason to dislike it, so it was only natural. Ena seemed to feel the same way, as she sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at the sky beyond the window.

Every year, for about ten days after the start of the new year, a festival was held in Wiheim. It was called the Night of the Mages, a unique event that allowed mages of all kinds to use all magic within the city, except for destructive acts.

Thanks to this, the streets in the distance were not dark but sparkling with a myriad of colors.

As if a high-ranking mage had appeared, a long dragon made of smoke writhed in the sky, with a mage sitting on top, smoking a long pipe and laughing. Parnin freely glided through the sky with his contractor, and Jewel Spell casters and elemental mages set off fireworks with all sorts of magic.

Ena quietly watched the scene, then flicked her fingers when she saw people gathering around the lightning rod installed for her. She gladly gave them what they wanted.

[Lightning Strike]

KWA-AAAAANG!!

Pure white thunderbolts struck the lightning rod everywhere. Lightning Strike, modified to adjust its power and be used in bursts. The mages who felt the chilling afterglow of destruction cheered and turned their gaze towards Ena's mansion. Ena rested her chin on her hand, letting the gazes of respect and reverence wash over her.

At that moment, someone knocked on her door.

"Master."

It was Asel. Ena immediately replied.

"Come in."

"Then, excuse me."

With permission granted, Asel cautiously opened the door and entered Ena's room.

He had been in and out of the room many times, but it still felt desolate every time. A bed was placed alone in the corner, and Magical artifacts and Artifacts rolled around on the desk. Other than that, there were no special features. There was a clothes rack, but even that was only half full.

A room too bleak to be a woman's room. But Asel thought it was just like Ena and approached her side.

"Sit down."

Ena glanced at Asel and said. Asel smiled wryly and sat next to her.

There was a slight gap between them. Ena frowned and tapped the spot right next to her with her hand.

"Sit here."

"...Isn't it too close?"

"What does it matter?"

I guess.

Asel scratched his head and sat where she had tapped. Ena, after confirming that he had settled down, turned her gaze back to the window. Asel also watched the festival taking place in the street.

They had a moment of silence. But it wasn't awkward. Neither Asel nor Ena were very talkative, so their tongues didn't feel itchy. They simply gazed outside with comfortable hearts.

How much time had passed? Ena opened her mouth, looking at the giant blue jewel that adorned the sky.

"Do you want to go to the academy?"

Ena's way of getting straight to the point without beating around the bush. He was used to it, so there was no confusion. Asel smiled wryly and nodded slightly.

"I didn't think it was a bad suggestion. To be honest... I want to go."

"Why?"

"As you know, Master, in order to achieve magical accomplishments, one must leave Wiheim and experience the world. You know how different magical achievements built on theory are from those built on practical experience."

There was no answer. Ena was still looking out the window. But her eyes were staring straight at Asel's face reflected in the window.

"The academy is a special place where you can get both theory and practice in this regard. Of course, it's not as good as risking your life, but it's also less dangerous. It has its advantages."

"..."

"And... I would have left here someday anyway. As I said, experiencing the world helps a mage's achievements. Even if it wasn't the academy, I would have belonged somewhere. I have no intention of settling in my current position."

It was a statement made with a firm will. Asel looked straight at Ena, and Ena sighed and turned her head towards him.

"I'll be honest. When I first took you in, I didn't think much about the future. But as time went by, the more your talent blossomed and the faster you achieved results, the more greedy I became."

"..."

"I want to keep watching you by my side. I want to see with my own eyes how far you can go. I want to interact with mages who have learned the same type of magic as me. I want to see the magic and Imagery with Uniqueness that you will gain in the future. I started to have those thoughts at some point."

"Those are all things you can do."

"If you stay by my side, yes."

Ena smiled wryly and held Asel's hand tightly.

"Experiencing the world as a mage. I know how important that is. I wandered the continent for a while, and I participated in wars and demon hunts. I know how that experience affected my magic and Imagery. You also need to have the same experience."

"..."

"But... people's hearts are so strange. When I think about the dangerous things I've experienced, on the one hand, I don't want you to go through such things. I wonder if we can just stay here together, researching magic and gaining practical experience through occasional sparring."

"...Master."

"Our disciple. When did you come so deep into my heart?"

Ena said so in a soft voice and stroked Asel's head.

"I know it's selfish. So I won't complain. Do what you want. Not as Ena the person, but as The Beginning, your master, I allow it."

"..."

"If your decision is made according to your will, then there's no reason for me to interfere. I called you to tell you this."

"Is that so."

Asel chuckled and added strength to the hand that was still held by Ena.

"Thank you. For respecting me."

"It's only natural. There's no need to thank me. I'm sorry, rather. Did I act too pathetic during the day?"

"It's okay. It was cute. Your small figure getting angry was like a puppy."

[Lightning Release]

Fzzzt.

Weak lightning was emitted from the fingertips of Ena's hand holding Asel's. Asel frowned slightly at the tingling sensation.

"Ugh."

"That's the price for teasing me. Accept it sweetly."

Ena said so and jumped up from her seat.

"This conversation is over now. Let's enjoy ourselves until you enter the academy."

Asel held his tingling hand, chuckled, and nodded.

"Then, would you like to go to the festival together tomorrow?"

"...The festival?"

"Irina said you've never attended one. So how about going together this time? Tomorrow is the last day of the festival."

Ena pondered for a moment, then smiled faintly and tapped Asel's forehead with her fingertip.

"Okay."

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The next day.

After midnight, Ena and Asel went out to the streets of Wiheim together. Asel was wearing a simple shirt and pants, and Ena had changed her hair color to black through a Magical artifact. The reason was that she didn't want to attract attention.

"It's hard to enjoy yourself if people keep greeting you as you pass by."

It was a valid point. Asel smiled and walked along the night streets with her. High-level mages appeared everywhere, showing off their magic and captivating the eyes of passersby. Asel and Ena stood in front of a handsome Jewel Spell caster and watched his magic.

"Jewel Spell demonstration! Secret technique! Diamond Shower!"

He scattered jewels into the air with a refreshing smile. Then, the transparent diamonds glowed brightly, then disintegrated into small dust particles, forming sparkling snow. Magic created purely for visual pleasure, with no practicality whatsoever. Asel exclaimed in admiration at the beautiful fluttering of the jewels.

"Is there such pretty magic in lightning magic?"

"No. Our magic is all specialized in killing."

"That's unfortunate."

"Make it and show it to me."

Ena said so, smiled, and walked forward. Asel followed her.

They bought appropriately sized chicken skewers from a nearby stall and ate them. Ena didn't eat much because she had a small appetite, so she ate about half and handed the rest to Asel. Asel neatly ate his share and the share that Ena had left behind.

As they were watching the mages, a huge shadow fell on the sky. When they raised their heads, they saw a floating island moving slowly, scattering rainwater containing Mana.

A liquid that didn't get you wet even if it touched you, and whose shape could be adjusted according to the mage's will.

An excellent medium often used in experiments, and a substance that spirits liked. Perhaps that was why the spirits attached to the spirit mages flew up and laughed as they were hit by the rainwater falling from the sky.

Spirits of all colors, large and small, formed a beautiful cluster of light as they played in the sky. The strange bird, Parnin, that he had seen when he first visited Wiheim was also buried in that light.

"Yaaaaa! Parnin! We have to go prepare for our next event! We don't have time to be doing this here! I already received all the contract money, so if it falls through, I'll have to pay it all back!"

[Be quiet, contractor. More importantly, hmm... the water is not very good today. Ask them to mix in some lava.]

"Aaaaaaack!!"

The spirit mage riding on Parnin tore at her hair and screamed.

Sierra von Kleier, a Flame Sorcerer from the Ignis Magic Tower who had also mastered spirit magic. He had never spoken to her, but she was famous within Wiheim as an arsonist and spirit lover. Thanks to this, Asel had heard her name.

"Shall we say hello?"

"Don't. Everyone's pretending not to see her."

When he looked around after hearing Ena's words, he saw that everyone was indeed turning their heads, pretending not to see Sierra. After confirming this, Asel also turned off his interest in Sierra, following them.

"Is there anywhere else you want to go?"

"Hmm... not really. Let's just walk."

Ena said so and moved her feet at a slow pace. Asel followed her and noticed a nearby stall, his eyes sparkling. He told Ena that he was going to the bathroom for a moment and ran to the stall.

The owner of the stall was an old man with a bent back. The items he sold were accessories with simple magic imbued in them, and Asel pointed to a brooch with a sapphire embedded in it.

"How much is this?"

"Five silver coins. Do you know what kind of magic is imbued in it?"

"Yes. Isn't it luck?"

"Oh ho. You have a good eye. Anyone who recognizes the magic only has to pay one silver coin."

"Thank you!"

Asel gave the old man one silver coin and took the brooch. Ena, who was sitting on a nearby bench, swinging her legs and watching people, noticed him and got up from her seat.

"You're back?"

"Yes. More importantly, Master. This is a gift."

"......? A gift?"

Ena tilted her head. Asel smiled and handed Ena the brooch he was holding.

A brooch with a sapphire embedded in it, similar to the color of her eyes. It wasn't a high-quality item, but Ena stared blankly at the brooch placed on her palm.

"I thought it would suit you, Master."

"......"

"...Perhaps you don't like it?"

Asel, who misunderstood Ena's silence, scratched the back of his head and muttered. Ena immediately shook her head, clutched the brooch tightly, and pulled it into her arms.

"No, I like it. A lot."

She looked at Asel with a bright smile.

"Thank you, Asel."

It was the brightest smile Ena had ever shown.

# 15 - Entrance Exam

Three weeks have already passed since the New Year began.

The season was still winter. However, the cold wave that had once gripped the land had long since passed. Although the cold wave was hardly felt in Wiheim, it was still the right time for it.

Yet, the weather remained cold, with snow falling from the sky instead of rain. While it was possible to stop the snow or rain through the city system, a certain amount was allowed to fall to maintain the atmosphere, as long as it wasn't excessive.

Today was one of those days. Snow was gently swirling in the streets, not accumulating but falling at a moderate pace. Asel glanced at the snow for a moment before turning his head back to his desk.

On the desk lay a letter. It was an item delivered by Norium from the Academy. The content informed him that the entrance exam for the Academy was scheduled to begin in three weeks, along with the location of the exam. Asel checked the attached map and sat on the edge of his bed.

"The southern forest of the Academy, huh."

The Luminous Academy is located in the southwest of the Empire. It has a considerable territory, large enough to easily rival a decent-sized city. It's no wonder that the Academy is referred to as an educational city.

The problem is that the Empire where the Academy is located is quite far from Wiheim. Even after arriving in the Empire, it would take at least a few days to reach the Academy.

Wasn't Wiheim on good terms with the Academy? He had certainly heard that they were close, but the physical distance was farther than that between friends, even enemies. At this point, it was practically as if they were strangers. It seemed that even by carriage, it would take at least two weeks, if not longer.

"To minimize variables, I should leave tomorrow."

Asel crossed his arms and leaned back, deep in thought.

If only he could transform his body into lightning like Ena and fly, there would be no problem. Unfortunately, he had not yet reached that level of mastery.

In the end, he would have to hire a carriage and travel by road. However, there was a possibility of encountering bandits along the way, or the road might be damaged, requiring him to take a detour. That would only extend the time beyond what he had anticipated.

Ultimately, there was only one solution.

"Right, I should ask for permission and just leave tomorrow."

It was a sudden decision, but there was no other way. He had to depart as soon as possible. Asel thought this and stood up to inform Ena.

At that moment, something flew in and tapped on the window.

Tap, tap.

“?”

Turning his head, he saw a metal bird with wings sitting outside the window, pecking at it. It was a product of magical engineering used to deliver letters in Wiheim, but this was the first time Asel had seen one in person. The letter from the Academy had been handed to him by Evelyn as soon as he returned from his outing.

"Well made."

Asel narrowed his eyes and stared at the metal bird.

The power was generated through a mana-driven device, and the overall frame and tendons were made of metal with good mana conductivity. It had been enchanted with autonomy-giving magic to think for itself, and some wind magic had been infused into both wings to reduce air resistance.

With this design, it would be able to distribute the mana flowing through its body evenly, allowing it to fly faster and more accurately. Asel thought this while gazing at the messenger bird. However, the bird seemed to interpret his curious gaze differently, shivering and alternating its gaze between the sky and the window.

It looked as if it were frightened, as if it thought he might dismantle it. Surprised that this metal bird could imagine such a thing, Asel opened the window. The messenger bird hesitantly crawled into the room, then opened its belly wide to retrieve a letter.

Looking at the outside, he confirmed that the word "Norium" was written on it. Since the mana emanating from the messenger bird was the same as his, he already knew this fact. Asel tore open the envelope and gently patted the cold metal head of the messenger bird.

"Thank you."

Beep!

The messenger bird made a cute sound, nodded its head, and flapped its wings, flying back into the sky. Asel closed the window and sat down in his chair to read the letter.

[Asel, the date for the Academy entrance exam has been set. You probably already know since I sent a letter over there, but just in case, I’m mentioning it again. You were aware, right? I believe you were. If you’re wondering why I, who am entering by recommendation, need to take the entrance exam, it’s because we need to establish a ranking for the exam, and they need to confirm that I didn’t send some strange person over there. I hope you understand.]

[Anyway. The reason I’m sending this letter again, even though I’ve already sent one, is that I forgot to inform you about this. As I get older, my memory has become a bit hazy. It seems that even wizards cannot escape the passage of time.]

That’s nonsense. Once one reaches the level of a grand wizard, their lifespan increases exponentially. While they are not immortal, they can easily achieve longevity.

Moreover, they can change their appearance to whatever they desire, so what does aging matter? They can only transform into their younger or older selves, but being unaffected by the passage of time is the same.

The fact that Norium appears as an old man is purely his own will. Furthermore, his mind is likely much sharper than it was in his youth.

Still, the fact that he forgot is likely true. That applies to both wizards and ordinary people without mercy.

Asel continued reading the letter.

[Now that the preface is over, let me get to the main point. You must have been quite surprised to see the date and location of the entrance exam written in the letter, but don’t worry. I will personally open a space for you on the day of the exam. That’s why I left this letter. And just in case, you don’t need to send a reply to this letter.]

“Oh.”

He exclaimed in admiration as he confirmed the contents of the letter.

If the Leader of the Alliance personally tears open space to connect coordinates, there was no need to set off by carriage tomorrow. He could take his time until the day of the exam without any major issues. Asel nodded and carefully folded the letter, placing it in his drawer.

Since he was told that a reply was unnecessary, it seemed there was no need to take the time to express his gratitude. He could convey it in person on the day itself.

"With this, the plan is completely canceled. I should focus solely on magical research for the time being."

Asel thought as he took out a book from the bookshelf.

Three weeks remained. He had to refine several high-level spells he hadn’t mastered yet and also conduct research to revise the basic spell "Thunderbolt" into various forms. Ena had told him that to create magic, one must start with revising the most basic spells, so this was something he needed to achieve first.

"I also need to regain my touch with fire magic, which I haven't practiced for a few days."

In addition, he planned to learn how to weave delicate barriers over his skin and familiarize himself with various types of magic and the corresponding circuits.

There was a lot to do. He didn’t have much time to spare.

So, without hesitation, he began his research. He repeatedly drew and erased formulas on paper, simulating the flow, fluidity, repulsion, expansion, compression, and decomposition of mana. He accumulated data by directly using magic and repeating failures.

It wasn’t research that would be completed in a day. Asel finished his research only when dawn broke and woke up the next day before sunrise to continue his studies.

This routine continued for three weeks.

He was tired.

Asel pressed on his throbbing eyelids as he thought.

Looking in the mirror, his already sharp features appeared even sharper than usual. Dark circles were heavily settled under his eyes. He clicked his tongue and left the room.

He had pushed himself too hard, thinking that the results of his experiments were about to come in, and ended up staying up all night. While he did achieve satisfactory results, it was also undeniably exhausting. After nearly three weeks of drastically reducing his sleep time and staying up late, it was only natural.

“Did you stay up all night again?”

As he descended to the dining room, Evelyn, who was setting the table, asked with a stern expression. Asel sat down with a wry smile.

“I can manage.”

“Come on. Just hold back today! It’s an important day!”

“Right. Silly Asel probably doesn’t even know what day it is.”

Hailey said playfully as she brought out breakfast.

Asel knew better than anyone what day it was.

“It’s the day of the Academy entrance exam. I’m well aware.”

“But you stayed up all night?”

“I’m sorry.”

With no excuse to offer, Asel immediately apologized. Evelyn, with her hands on her hips, huffed and plopped down next to him. Hailey also sat down at an empty seat, skillfully twirling a knife in her hand.

“Our little brother. Why can’t you take care of yourself? Do I have to do it for you?”

“This is just this once, just this once. No need to fuss.”

“You said that last time too, and you came out looking like a corpse after two days of research.”

He had no retort.

Asel neatly ignored Evelyn’s words and took a sip of water. Getting embroiled in a losing argument was something only a third-rate wizard would do.

“The water tastes good.”

“Don’t ignore me!”

Evelyn pouted and poked Asel in the side with her finger.

“Ow. Ow.”

Asel willingly succumbed to her attack. Not long after, Ena, still in her pajamas, appeared in the dining room, rubbing her eyes. Asel stood up slightly to welcome her. The other two also stood up, bowing and saying, "Good morning, Ena."

“Did you wake up, Master?”

“……Mmm.”

Ena replied in a heavily drowsy voice, then narrowed her eyes at Asel.

“Did you stay up all night?”

“……It just happened that way. Haha.”

“You're laughing.”

“…….”

Asel fell silent. Ena sighed deeply and sat down.

“You stayed up all night on the day of the exam. What are you going to do about your condition?”

“I’m fine. Staying awake all day isn’t new for me.”

“Is that something to brag about?”

“…….”

“Haah…… There’s a medicine that will help with fatigue, so take that before you go. I’ll also pack a few things you’ll need for the exam.”

“Thank you.”

Asel said, bowing his head. Ena, who was looking at him with disapproval, soon picked up her utensils and began to eat. The other three also had their breakfast.

After finishing the meal, Asel headed to Ena’s room with a suitably sized backpack. Ena brought out a few potions she had stored in the storage and handed them to Asel.

“Start with the yellow one. It’s a stimulant.”

“Yes.”

Asel immediately downed the yellow potion in the vial. The effect was instantaneous. His slightly dazed mind became clear, and his heavy eyelids felt lighter. Ena watched Asel, who was amazed, and explained the remaining potions she had brought.

“I don’t know how the exam will be conducted, but there will definitely be combat. So, I brought some potions to help with that.”

“What effects do they have?”

“Each one is a nerve relaxant, Magic Amplification, instant recovery potion, mana regeneration potion, local anesthetic, painkiller, and hemostatic agent. I’ve only selected useful ones, so their performance should be sufficient.”

Ena said confidently. Asel looked at the potions in his hand with a dubious expression.

…Isn’t bringing these a bit unfair? He thought, but he still placed the potions into his backpack. If it turned out to be a problem, he could always return them on-site. There was no disadvantage in taking them.

“Thank you, Master. I will definitely pass the exam and return.”

Asel carefully organized the potions to avoid breaking them and spoke to Ena. Ena, looking at him as if to say what he was talking about, pointed to a box in the corner of the room.

“There’s still more to give you.”

“Huh? Is there more?”

“Yeah. A Magic Amplification ring, a presence-detection pendant, a lucky charm, a mana recovery amplification ring, a heat device, a disruption bomb, and a mana flow control device, as well as an external mana power source. There’s even more. Take them all.”

“……Isn’t that too much? I’m not going to war.”

“You might need them. Just take them.”

Ena’s attitude was firm. Ultimately, Asel could only head to the Alliance after putting on all the artifacts that Ena handed him.

The ten rings on his hands and the various necklaces around his neck made clinking sounds with every movement. The glasses he wore for the first time were quite uncomfortable.

In that state, he arrived at the Alliance. Thanks to Norium’s prior arrangements, the path to the Leader’s reception room went very smoothly.

Arriving at the reception room with everyone from the mansion, Asel knocked on the door, and a familiar voice came from the other side.

* Come in.

“Excuse me.”

Asel slowly opened the door and entered the reception room. His gaze met Norium and the others, who were already preparing tea. Asel immediately bowed his head and greeted him.

“Good morning, Leader.”

“Ah, good morning. Yes, yes, sit down… Wait a moment.”

The voice of Norium, who had been speaking with a smile, suddenly turned cold. He sensed the numerous artifacts covering Asel’s body and let out a hollow laugh.

“Are you going to war or something?”

“That’s what I want to say.”

Asel replied with an aggrieved expression.

# 16 - Entrance Exam (2)

"The personal belongings you can bring to the entrance exam are limited to three. You can't bring the rest."

"Says who?"

"Ugh, Senior. Please."

Norium contorted his already wrinkled face as he glared at Ena. Ena didn't back down and met his gaze head-on.

"I'm just trying to keep my disciple safe, what's it to him?"

"The Academy Dean, that's who."

"Call him."

"I'm going crazy, really."

Norium shook his head, downing the hot tea like water.

Asel, watching the two of them, slowly removed the Artifacts he was wearing. Ena looked at him with a dissatisfied expression, but Asel continued to place the Artifacts neatly on the table.

That alone filled half the table. He left only the three potions he had put in his bag and returned the rest to Ena.

Ena pouted, accepting the bottles.

"...Even war mages don't carry this many Magical artifacts, geez."

Norium sighed deeply and said that, then looked at Asel and smiled.

"Aren't you nervous?"

"...I'm a little nervous, but not too much."

"Don't worry. There's no way you'll fail the exam. If you fail, it's the same as saying there are no qualified candidates."

"Aren't you overpraising me?"

"Just stating the facts."

Asel chuckled at Norium's jest.

"When should I depart?"

"In 10 minutes. The examinees are probably gathered by now. The protagonist always appears last, so it's best to go as close to the deadline as possible."

Norium said that and poured tea into Asel's teacup. The bittersweet aroma rose with the steam and lingered at the tip of his nose.

"Then I'll prepare the magic, so spend 10 minutes saying your goodbyes. You have to appease a teacher who's acting like you're going on some long journey, don't you think?"

What's he going to be like on the Academy entrance day?

Norium clicked his tongue and added that, then entered the door at the back of the reception room. Soon after, Mana swirled inside. Since it wasn't a short distance teleport, even the Great Mage had to draw the Formula himself, it seemed.

Actually, that was the norm for ordinary mages. They had to draw the Formula and chant for every spell they used. He had forgotten because most of the mages in Wiheim used magic with chantless casting and Formula calculation. Had he become too accustomed to this side of things?

"Asel."

While he was lost in thought, Evelyn, who was sitting next to him, spoke with slightly tearful eyes. Asel gave a bitter smile and replied.

"Why are you crying?"

"Just... I'm so proud. It feels like just yesterday we were picking bugs to eat together in the slums, when did you grow up so much?"

"We grew up together."

Asel wiped away Evelyn's tears and pressed his forehead against hers.

"We haven't even entered the Academy yet, why are you like this already. Let's cry later. Just cheer me on."

"Okay... I will."

Evelyn roughly wiped her face with her hands, smiled brightly, and kissed Asel's forehead. Then she shouted.

"Good luck! Do well!"

"Do your best, kiddo~"

Hailey waved her hand with a smiling expression, munching on a cookie. Asel smiled back and nodded.

There was still one more person to greet. Asel turned his body to the left and met the eyes of Ena, who was looking straight up at him. Ena stared intently into Asel's obsidian eyes and opened her arms wide. Asel, understanding the meaning of her gesture, gently hugged Ena.

"I believe in you."

Ena patted Asel's back and whispered in his ear. Asel, recognizing the trust contained in those words, smiled and replied.

"Yes."

With that, the greetings were over. Soon after, the promised 10 minutes had passed. Norium opened the door and called Asel, and Asel bowed once to the three of them before entering the room where Norium was. In the center of the room, a round, black rift floated. The space around it was shattered like broken glass, and a massive amount of Mana could be felt from inside the rift.

"Are you ready?"

Norium grinned and tapped the rift. Asel took a long breath, hardened his face, and nodded. Then he immediately took a step towards the inside of the rift.

\*

"Have all the participants arrived?"

Ross, the chief supervisor of the Academy entrance exam, asked his colleague. Ross's colleague, who was wearing glasses and coldly flipping through documents, quickly grasped the faces of those gathered in the forest clearing and shook his head.

"One person hasn't arrived yet."

"Who is it?"

"The mage from Wiheim."

Ross clicked his tongue and tapped the sword at his waist with his fingertips. Alon, the supervisor wearing glasses, watched this and asked.

"The distance between Wiheim and here is quite far. Should we just start? Or wait longer?"

"It's true that the mage from Wiheim is a valuable talent, but we can't delay the exam for one person. Moreover, there are some nobles in this exam."

Ross said that and looked down from the platform. Warriors and mages with various characteristics were preparing for the exam, trimming the items they had brought. Ross checked the faces of the key figures among them.

A gloomy-looking woman with long red hair. Grace Bydel. The daughter of Duke Bydel and a genius who recently renewed the title of the youngest Expert in the Empire. She was sitting on a neatly cut tree, looking at the sky and sighing deeply.

Besides her, there was also a disciple of an elder of the Aurora Magic Tower who wielded Stellar Rank Magic, a pureblood vampire sucking on a blood pack, the daughter of Count Hargelin with a huge double-edged axe on her shoulder, and a warrior from a mercenary background. He checked the condition of those who were likely to take the top spot and looked at the watch on his wrist.

About 15 seconds left until the start of the exam. One person hadn't arrived yet, but he couldn't wait for him. It was a pity, but he had no choice but to disqualify him. Ross thought that and prepared to infuse Mana into his voice.

It was then.

Crackle!!

The intact space cracked in a round shape. Fragments of the broken space fell down, and a black rift suddenly appeared. At the sudden anomaly, the supervisors, including Ross, sharpened their eyes, and a young man fell out of the rift. He landed on the ground with light movements and cleared away the space fragments scattering around.

"Did I arrive?"

He muttered that and glanced around. Then he shut his mouth tight. Everyone gathered at the exam site was looking at him.

"..."

"......What's that?"

"What a flashy entrance."

Whispering voices spread secretly. The young man scratched his cheek in embarrassment and threw himself into the crowd. Alon, who found him, coughed and said.

"Asel? Is that right?"

"Yes, yes. That's right."

"Confirmed. I'll do a baggage check."

"Yes."

Asel had the contents of his bag and the items he had packed in his clothes checked by the supervisor and was released.

"Three potions. Confirmed. No problem."

Alon pushed up his glasses once, sorted the documents he was holding, and stood behind Ross.

-...Asel?

At that time, a low voice was heard from somewhere. But it was buried by Ross's words that followed.

"Everyone, be quiet. I will explain the exam content."

The Mana contained in his voice roughly crashed through the air like a wave. The conversations of those who were whispering stopped abruptly, and everyone's attention was focused on Ross.

There was no need to continue with the introduction. Ross immediately informed everyone about the exam.

"The conditions for passing the exam are simple. Dispose of the golems released in the forest, collect the required amount of their cores, and place them in the center of the forest. The exam will last for a total of one week, and you can form alliances with other participants."

"......"

"Looting is also allowed. However, murder is strictly prohibited. If you violate this, you will be executed on the spot at the discretion of the supervisor or go through the proper administrative procedures, so be sure to keep that in mind."

As Ross finished speaking, the supervisors lined up around him came down and handed black bracelets to the participants.

"If you want to give up the exam midway, inject Mana into the bracelet. Then you can escape to a safe place through the built-in teleportation magic. It will automatically activate in case of serious injury, so you don't have to worry."

"......"

"Anyone have any questions?"

Someone raised their hand. Ross gestured to her.

"If we form an alliance, how should we distribute the cores?"

"Figure it out yourself."

"......Pardon?"

"The number of cores that each individual must submit does not decrease just because you have formed a group. So you have to deal with more golems than someone moving alone. Decide carefully on the distribution of cores."

"......"

Hearing Ross's words, a girl with ash-colored hair lowered her gaze as if deep in thought.

After finishing his words, Ross once again asked the participants if they had any questions. But this time, no one raised their hand. Ross nodded satisfactorily and clapped twice with a smile.

"Then let's begin. Good luck."

In the next moment, the bracelets they were wearing glowed. Asel realized that the reason for this was that the teleportation magic built into the bracelet had been activated.

A teleportation Formula that randomly selects and drops you inside the designated forest. It was similar to Space spell, but the framework was different. Space magic has a strong 'jumping over' characteristic, and teleportation Formula has a strong 'omitting the process of moving' characteristic.

This magic was the same. Asel was looking at the Formula in the bracelet with interested eyes.

At that time, a shout was heard from behind.

"Asel! Aseeeel!!"

"......?"

Asel turned his head at the voice calling his name. A woman with a fancy sword at her waist and long red hair fluttering was running towards him urgently. Unlike the familiar way she called his name, she was a complete stranger.

'Oh crap, who is it.'

He rummaged through his memories, wondering if he had met her in the past, but he had never seen a face like hers. She was a complete stranger.

As if reading the thoughts contained in his gaze. The woman shouted, patting her large chest with her hand.

"It's me! Grace! Grace Bydel!"

Hearing her name didn't help him at all. Asel frowned and took a step back. Grace's face was dyed with despair at that action.

"Why, why are you running away? Don't you know me? Your wif-"

Whoosh!!

Her words disappeared at the same time as the teleportation Formula was activated. Asel stared at the spot where she had been for a moment, then lost interest. Why was some crazy person sticking to him before the exam even started? He sighed deeply and lightly stretched his body.

"......Excuse me."

As he was doing that, one of the supervisors cautiously spoke to him. Asel looked at her and asked.

"Yes?"

"Why didn't you teleport......"

"Ah. That's because I refused."

"......Pardon?"

Her face contorted grotesquely. The other supervisors were the same.

"......What do you mean?"

"It seems to be a method of activating magic with the Mana built into the bracelet. I forcibly stopped the Mana in the bracelet at the same time as the Formula was activated. So I didn't teleport."

"......Is that possible?"

"Yes."

Asel answered nonchalantly, glanced around, and nodded.

"It seems this is the center of the forest. That device on the platform. Is that where we put the cores?"

"Yes? Ah, yes...... That's right......"

She, who hadn't come to her senses yet, answered with a dazed voice.

Asel thanked her for telling him and slowly moved his steps and entered the forest.

With that, the exam began.

# 17 - Entrance Exam (3)

Knowing where the center of the forest was located was quite a significant advantage.

Those with relatively sharp minds would realize that the place they originally stood was the center, but for them, unlike Asel, it didn't serve as a considerable benefit.

The southern forest of the academy. This land was an artificial ecosystem created solely for the entrance exam, and its size was beyond imagination. Being thrown into such a place without a map and trying to find the center was a very challenging task. They probably wouldn't even know where they were standing in the first place.

On the other hand, Asel started at the center. No matter where he headed, finding the path was relatively easy. Still, just in case, he laid down a spell close to the center.

Crackle!!

Lightning danced on his fingertips. Asel gently threw the blooming dark blue lightning onto a tree.

[Thunder Mark]

As soon as the lightning struck the tree, it left a burning mark. Asel confirmed that his Mana was richly embedded in that mark and nodded.

By leaving his Mana behind like this, he wouldn't have to worry about getting lost as long as he returned to a place where he could feel his Mana. It was wise to be thorough with insurance.

He ignited lightning between his fingers and moved forward.

Asel headed east into the forest. The muddy ground slowed him down, and the dense leaves blocked the sun. It was still winter, so a chill lingered low in the places where the sun couldn't reach. Experiencing such a bitter cold for the first time after leaving Wiheim, Asel layered a barrier mixed with the essence of fire magic over his skin.

This allowed him to have some resistance not only against physical attacks but also against magic and the surrounding environment. Asel continued to move while watching the faint steam rising around him. After about ten minutes, he spotted a wriggling shape in a pile of grass.

It was not human. Then the answer was clear.

‘A golem.’

Asel focused his Mana to identify the creature hidden in the grass pile. As expected, a golem, easily exceeding two meters in height, was shaking its body in a curled-up position. Although the grass pile was quite large, it wasn't big enough for such a golem to hide in. It seemed to be crammed in there.

It appeared to have a higher intelligence than expected. Who was the creator of this golem that could design something so intricate?

A surge of curiosity. But Asel suppressed his curiosity and focused on the exam. There would be opportunities to dismantle the golem later. During the exam period, he needed to concentrate on defeating the golem and retrieving its core. Since his goal was to achieve a high score, he had to move diligently from now on.

He quickly drew up his Mana and formulated a spell in his mind. He envisioned and manifested a spell powerful enough to kill the golem in one blow, one that it had not yet discovered. A mid-level lightning spell surged forth into the world, following his will.

Crackle.

The lightning that blossomed above Asel's hand raced forward at high speed. The lightning, shot out faster than sound, traced a square around the golem and quickly formed a cube made of lightning. The golem hastily raised its body in response to the overwhelming Mana surrounding it, but Asel was even faster.

[Electric Confinement]

Crackle, crackle!!!

Lightning surged into the formed cube. The golem's limbs disassembled, and as its outstretched arm touched the walls in an attempt to escape, it shattered into pieces. The golem opened its mouth as if to scream, but the lightning that struck down crushed its throat.

Its head rolled helplessly and was buried in the mud. Soon after, the golem's movements ceased. The only remaining shape was around the heart where the core was located. Asel withdrew his magic and rummaged through the shattered golem's chest to extract the transparent core.

The amount of Mana contained in the core was not that impressive. It would take about fifty of these cores to operate the device he had seen earlier.

That was quite a lot.

The reason they hadn't informed the participants of the required number of cores was likely to assess their judgment, reasoning skills, and Mana detection abilities.

"That wasn't such a difficult task."

Asel muttered as he placed the core into his backpack.

He had expected the difficulty of the exam to be outrageous since it was said to be the continent's top educational institution. However, it was more manageable than he thought. At this level, there seemed to be no need to form a party. If the golems fell with just one spell, then the roles of vanguards or supporters would be of little significance. It seemed he could easily pass even alone.

‘Maybe others are the same.’

Asel moved forward, recalling the fierce faces he had seen before the exam began.

He scattered his Mana around to locate the golem. Without hesitation, he moved toward that spot.

"Damn it."

Rohan spat out curses as he pulled the core from the golem's chest. The transparent core, extracted along with stone debris, sparkled brilliantly in the light. He exhaled deeply and climbed down from the fallen golem's body.

"Is anyone seriously injured?"

He looked around at the fallen participants. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt. There were a few minor injuries, but nothing dangerously severe. However, it was clear that everyone was exhausted. They had just hunted their fifth golem, yet the fatigue was overwhelming compared to their harvest. The exam's difficulty was abnormally high.

"Damn academy. Each golem is on par with a seasoned expert."

A sharp-featured young man, Paul, spat out. He trembled as he clenched his injured arm, which had been cracked while blocking a golem's fist.

This was far too serious to simply be called an exam. Each golem was equivalent to a fully-fledged expert, and they hadn’t even been told how many they needed to catch.

Experts weren't just some passing dogs. They were warriors capable of easily obtaining decent positions. Breaking walls with their fists and running at speeds beyond limits was as natural to them as breathing. They had truly unleashed monsters like wild dogs into the forest.

Some even ambushed from hiding. It was maddening.

"Still, this might be a decent harvest."

A girl with ash-colored hair and golden eyes, Celine, murmured while leaning against a tree.

Having come from the Aurora Magic Tower, she held a relatively high standing within the party. Perhaps because of that, the others who had been voicing their complaints turned their heads toward her, sealing their lips.

"No one knows the situation elsewhere. Maybe we’re the fastest."

"……How can you be so sure?"

"I didn’t mean to say that. I just meant to encourage us to keep doing well without getting discouraged."

Celine replied irritably, glaring at Borwell.

"Are you that clueless? Instead of whining and bringing down the mood, just shut up and rest. It's annoying."

After finishing her words, Celine closed her eyes. It was a signal for no more noisy chatter. The party, while expressing their discontent toward her, quietly took a breath. Considering the power of the magic Celine had displayed, it was only natural.

Stellar Rank Magic that harnessed the power of the stars. Although it required a considerable amount of time to charge, once completed, even lower-level spells could easily tear apart spells of the same rank from other elements. If she hadn’t cast her magic appropriately, Paul’s arm wouldn’t just be cracked; it would have been completely shattered.

She had also shown several feats of smashing the golem's legs or crushing its head. For the party, Celine was an indispensable talent. There were plenty of reasons to cater to her whims.

"……The sun is setting."

Rohan muttered as he gazed at the sky slowly turning to twilight.

They had clearly started in the morning, yet evening had already arrived. The short winter days contributed to this.

Once the sun fully set, the chill would likely intensify. They needed to set up a campsite before it got too late. He didn’t want to spend the night shivering in the cold.

They could continue marching, but wandering through a forest teeming with golems and wild animals without light was akin to committing suicide. Moreover, many of the various animals they had seen on the way were more nocturnal than diurnal. If they suddenly jumped out from the bushes while tired, it would be hard to react.

"Let’s spend the night here."

Rohan said, looking at Celine. She opened her eyes, glanced at the sky, and nodded.

"Yeah, that would be better."

"You’ve only found five cores so far? Are you already saying to rest?"

"Shut up, Borwell. You were trembling and sitting down the moment you saw a golem, and now you’re finally finding your voice?"

Paul growled at Borwell. Celine agreed with his words.

"If you don’t like it, go. I won’t stop you."

"……No. I’ll help."

"Really? Then go get some branches and leaves. Enough for all five of us to rest."

"……Got it."

Borwell swallowed hard and set off to gather branches. It was only when he was out of sight that Celine spoke again.

"Paul, since your arm is shattered, rest. Sevia, go nearby and gather some firewood to start a fire. I’ll lay down some barrier magic around us."

"I’ll flatten the ground."

Celine nodded at Rohan and stood up to prepare the barrier magic formula in a suitable location.

At that moment, a thunderous sound echoed from somewhere.

Rumble!!

Celine frowned, looking up at the sky, wondering if it was going to rain, but there were no dark clouds in sight. Just as she was about to harden her expression and cast a detection spell for the unusual phenomenon.

"Ahhh!"

Borwell's scream echoed from deep within the forest. The party immediately stopped what they were doing, grabbed their weapons, and headed toward the source of the sound.

Before long, they found Borwell collapsed on the ground. Rohan and Sevia quickly rushed to his side.

"Borwell! What happened?!"

"Wizard……! Wizard……"

He was frothing at the mouth and trembling. His arms were charred black, and blood was oozing from the cracked skin.

Crackle, crackle!

Dark blue currents flickered on and off across Borwell's body. Celine realized that the current had been caused by a direct hit from magic, and her expression hardened.

"It’s an ambush."

"What?"

Before Rohan could respond to her muttering, a flash of lightning erupted from the dark forest. Immediately after, a bolt of lightning shot out at a speed beyond perception, piercing through Borwell's shoulder.

[Chasing Thunder]

Boom!!

With a loud bang, his body jolted, and the bracelet activated, transporting him to safety.

It was deemed a serious injury. Celine swallowed hard as she gauged the power of the recently fired lightning.

Even the faint density of the Mana felt like at least level 6. It was a stark difference for her, still at level 5, to face. But she reminded herself that she was not alone and waited for the owner of the lightning to appear.

There was no need to wait long. As soon as she raised her Mana, a man walked out from the darkness of the forest.

It was a familiar face.

The wizard who had drawn everyone's attention upon his arrival. He appeared, surrounded by lightning. He tilted his head as he looked at the four people gathered together.

"……? A party?"

"……Everyone, prepare for battle."

There was no need for conversation. Rohan unsheathed his sword and spoke, while Paul and Sevia each gripped their weapons tightly. Celine stepped back to prepare her magic. Asel watched the scene with a smirk, seemingly amused.

"Attacking first and then this… how ridiculous."

"You attacked first…?"

Thanks to stepping back, Celine had more leeway than the others and heard Asel's muttering. She hurriedly opened her mouth to stop the party, but Rohan was faster. He surged forward, swinging his sword rapidly.

Even if he was strong, he was still a wizard. Fighting at close range like this was tantamount to suicide. He wouldn’t be able to cast spells or even complete a formula. A rear guard without a vanguard was as good as defeated the moment they stepped forward.

This was common sense. A fact everyone knew and believed without doubt. Therefore, Rohan did not hesitate to aim for Asel's shoulder.

A simple swing that had no intention of defending or evading. Asel watched the trajectory and flicked a finger from below to above.

That alone completed the spell.

[Ascending Thunder]

Boom!!!

A massive bolt of lightning shot up from the ground to the sky.

# 18 - Entrance Exam (4)

A current of electricity spread all around, sharp enough to make the air tingle. Leaves ignited in the flash of lightning, and a searing pain struck as if a knife were slicing through the skin. Sevia and Paul, who had been moving alongside Rohan, suddenly halted, their bodies jolting as they collapsed to the ground.

“Cough!”

“Ahhh!!”

Their bodies trembled uncontrollably. Was there something wrong with the electrical signals in their brains? Paul’s fingers twitched on their own.

Gritting his teeth, Paul lifted his head and glared at Asel. Rohan was nowhere to be found in the spot where the lightning had struck. He had been severely injured and moved away by just one spell.

‘Just one spell?’

Paul let out a hollow laugh as he reflected on his own thoughts.

That was not a power that could be explained with such words. The destructive force was beyond imagination, far exceeding any premonition that might accompany its manifestation. It was at least double that of Celine’s. Moreover, the speed of the spell’s manifestation defied common sense. If one approached the battle thinking of Asel as just a simple magician, they would end up defeated in an instant, just like Rohan.

“Sevia!”

Paul struck Sevia’s back with his trembling hand. She had been lying on the ground, crying, but seemed to regain her senses as she lifted her head.

“Listen carefully. We hold out until Celine completes her spell. After that, we decide whether to continue fighting or to flee. Do you understand?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Then get up!”

As Paul shouted, he aimed his sword at the still-standing Asel. Asel glanced at Sevia, who was struggling to rise, then turned his head toward Celine, who was chanting her spell.

“Is the meeting over?”

“...Ugh.”

“The spell you’re using is Stellar Rank Magic. It has great power but requires a warm-up time. And…”

Asel chuckled as he locked eyes with Celine, who wore a stern expression.

“It’s vulnerable to external interference.”

Crack.

Asel twisted his fingers as if manipulating a puppet. In response, Celine’s formula began to twist grotesquely. The characters she had inscribed were erased, and the round circle became distorted, releasing Mana outward. Celine, who had been channeling Mana into her formula, coughed up blood from the backlash.

“Ugh!”

A pain surged through her as if her organs were being twisted. Celine stared at Asel with disbelief, drenched in cold sweat.

‘He interfered with my magic from the outside? How is that possible?’

She was a magician renowned as a genius even within the Magic Tower. No matter how skilled a sorcerer was, they could not recklessly interfere with her Mana manipulation. In fact, it was rare for any magician to even attempt such a thing. Unless they were a grand magician, that kind of interference was impossible.

So, could it be that this man was a grand magician?

“Cough!”

With each thought, the formula twisted further. Celine hurriedly regained her focus and retracted her spell. The Mana that had been pouring out like a collapsed dam struck her hard, causing her to stagger from the impact.

“Sevia! Protect Celine!”

Paul shouted loudly as he rushed toward Asel, witnessing the scene unfold.

Unlike Rohan, he was aware of Asel’s magic. He was prepared to dodge to the side at any moment and counterattack. Asel watched him and let out a soft hum.

“It’s my first time seeing an Aura. It spreads through the body via blood vessels from the heart.”

“Don’t get cocky!”

Asel grinned and leaped backward. Following that small movement, a massive storm erupted.

[Wind Flood]

The spreading wind. Paul squinted as he sliced through the air with his sword, trying to clear the swirling mud. Through his now-open eyes, a red flame spread toward him.

[Fuse]

The flames danced in response to Asel’s gesture, engulfing Paul’s shoulder. He gritted his teeth against the searing pain and quickly severed the shoulder armor. The entire process occurred with remarkable speed. His quick judgment and action showed that his combat sense was sharper than expected. Perhaps it was due to his developed instincts as a warrior.

Swoosh!

In the brief moment of thought, a sharp dagger sliced through the air.

Asel caught the dagger thrown by Sevia with fire and burned it, then scattered the ashes widely. He then unleashed his magic.

[Ignite]

A spell that ignites anything it touches. Unlike spells projected from a distance, this magic, which directly ignites objects, was powerful in proportion to its risks. The scattered ashes glowed red-hot, and sensing the danger, Paul retreated.

Boom!

The flames, mediated by the ashes, spread rapidly, igniting the forest. Paul gritted his teeth against the flames that had caught on his leg, discarding his leg armor. His exposed trousers clung to his skin, oozing with pus and blood.

A horrific scene. Asel was slightly taken aback, seeing the power of his own magic for the first time.

‘...Was it that strong?’

He already knew from his duels with other magicians how far his magic had progressed. However, this was the first time he had struck an opponent directly and witnessed its destructive power and lethality. Most magicians could either block or evade attacks, so the number of times he had drawn blood in duels was minimal.

In most cases, it was Asel himself who had been the one to bleed. His usual opponents were Ena or magicians from the Witch Council. No matter how similar their ranks and talents were, their combat styles had always seemed quite challenging to him, given his lack of experience.

Of course, they struggled to cope with Asel’s growing magic day by day, but still, it was mostly Asel who ended up bleeding in duels.

Thus, when he adjusted his power as he usually did during those duels, it seemed he had overdone it this time. Asel sighed, worrying about the well-being of the man who had vanished after being struck by lightning.

“...He’s not dead, right?”

Though he muttered that, he couldn’t shake off the feeling of unease. Asel let out a deep sigh and canceled the lightning spell he had been preparing to unleash as a follow-up attack.

Given that he couldn’t gauge the appropriate level of power right now, recklessly firing off a lightning spell would be madness. He could easily end up splitting his opponent in half. A lightning spell focused solely on destruction and killing was not a good choice in the current situation.

‘I’ll have to use only other types of magic for this test.’

Of course, there was nothing to worry about when facing golems, so it was a matter of being cautious only in human-to-human combat. Asel thought this as he approached the staggering Paul.

“...Huh.”

Despite his precarious state, Paul’s eyes remained sharp. Asel found that fierce gaze quite appealing. Although he was a bandit who had attacked him along with his companions, Asel didn’t think too poorly of him.

Hadn’t the supervisor mentioned it? That plundering among participants was allowed. He was merely acting according to the rules that had been laid out. He didn’t harbor any particular grudge. After all, he had grown up in the slums; what was the big deal about plundering? It was a place where people would rip out the organs of those who were asleep.

Borwell was a gentleman by comparison. Asel smiled and stopped right in front of Paul’s range.

A brief lull. Celine was calming down and reciting her spell again, while Sevia was stealthily approaching with daggers held in reverse grip.

Though she was moving quietly, her stealth was meaningless in a space saturated with Asel’s Mana. Everything was in the palm of his hand.

“What’s your name?”

Ignoring Sevia and Celine, Asel asked Paul. Paul, suspicious of his intentions, answered readily.

“Paul Fedrick.”

“Are you a noble?”

“...Yeah.”

“It’s my first time seeing a noble. Are most like you, filled with venom?”

“...You’ve never seen a noble before? Did you just come down from the mountains?”

Paul let out a hollow laugh as he spoke.

Magicians were as rare a resource as nobles. Because of that, they often had many connections with nobles, and the higher-ranking magicians tended to exhibit this tendency even more.

The magician before him was at a level where it wouldn’t be surprising if he had mingled with high-ranking nobles.

Has he really never seen a noble before?

“It wasn’t in the forest. I trained in the city.”

Asel answered casually and kicked Paul in the abdomen. With a barrier layered over it, the kick engulfed in flames sent Paul flying backward. While he grimaced at the sudden attack, Sevia charged through the flames.

“Die!”

Her momentum was strong, but there was an undeniable tremor and fear in her eyes. She was probably not accustomed to such situations.

Of course, Asel had no intention of showing her any mercy. He snapped his fingers, unleashing an intangible shockwave centered around himself.

The shockwave, a lower-tier magic of the shock type, merely sent nearby objects flying, but when it was unleashed from Asel’s hands, it projected enough force to shake the trees. Sevia’s body was pushed back and slammed into a tree.

Crack!

“Cough!”

With the sound of something breaking, Sevia coughed up blood and breath. The outcome was decided before they could even exchange blows.

Sevia, with broken bones possibly piercing her organs, fumbled for her bracelet, blood trickling from her mouth. A light enveloped her body, transporting her to safety.

In an instant, the group had dwindled from five to two. What remained was a magician with tangled circuits and a frontline warrior oozing with burns. They were to face a high-ranking sorcerer who was still in prime condition.

There was no chance of victory.

Paul let out a deep sigh and raised his broken hands. Just that motion made his overworked arms scream in protest.

“I surrender. I know it’s shameless, but please let me go just this once. I want to enroll.”

“I surrender too.”

As soon as Paul lowered his sword, Celine, who had been groaning, shouted. Asel nodded, confirming that the two had completely lost their will to fight.

“I’ll let you go, so hand over the cores.”

“...We only have five.”

“So?”

“...Sigh. Take them. Celine has them.”

Asel chuckled and approached Celine. She, looking frustrated, bit her lip and pulled out five cores from her bosom. The cores were transparent, with faint Mana swirling within. They were not fake. Asel casually stuffed the cores into his backpack.

“Have you really only hunted five? I guess you haven’t encountered many golems.”

“What are you talking about? We only managed to catch the ones that strayed from the group.”

“Can’t you do a drive hunt?”

“?”

“?”

The corners of both their eyes crinkled in confusion.

“How can you do a drive hunt? Each one is like a weapon.”

“...What?”

“...Your reaction is strange. How many cores do you have?”

“Twenty-five.”

Asel said, shaking his creaking backpack. Celine glanced at the inside, her expression asking what kind of person he was.

“...Are you perhaps a grand magician?”

“I am a grand magician’s disciple.”

Asel smiled softly, closed his backpack, and turned his back to the burning forest as he walked away.

“More importantly, you should run quickly. They’re coming.”

“What’s coming—”

The moment he spoke, loud voices echoed from beyond the darkness of the forest.

“Is this where the lightning just struck?”

“Yeah, it must be an event created by the academy. We need to hurry.”

“Hey, other guys are coming too! Run, damn it!”

“Get lost, you bastards! Nobles won’t go easy on you!”

“Keep Grace in check! Don’t let her come!”

A commotion erupted in the midnight forest. Sevia clenched her teeth and turned her head toward the approaching voices. But Asel had already slipped away long ago. Not a single strand of his hair was visible.

“...He said his name was Asel.”

She recalled the supervisor’s words before the test began and stood up. Paul also got up, pouring a regeneration potion he had brought onto his wounds. The two exchanged glances and quickly moved in the opposite direction of the voices.

Thus, the first day of the test came to an end amidst chaos.

# 19 - Entrance Exam (5)

The second day of the exam dawned.

"Ugh..."

Asel woke up to the sound of birds chirping. He must have slept on a bed of leaves, because his back was quite sore. He also felt some muscle pain, and his throat was hoarse. He had cast a barrier and raised the internal temperature, but it wasn't enough. He wanted to wake up in perfect condition, but his body was slightly worse than he had hoped.

Still, this was good enough.

Asel burned all the leaves that had formed his makeshift bed, erased all traces of magic, and moved on.

His destination was the river he had spotted the previous evening.

What he needed for the week-long exam wasn't a party or a core, but stamina and food. The longer the exam went on, the more important water and food would become. In that respect, the river was a pretty good source of food. He could get both water and food there.

Asel didn't need much water. He could create it whenever he wanted, so it wasn't a big deal. But food was different. He had to find that himself. So he was heading to the relatively nearby river to catch some fish.

'I'm not very confident in my cooking skills, though.'

Still, he should be able to grill them without much difficulty. Asel thought as he crossed the bushes and arrived at the river.

The river was waist-deep, but quite wide. He could easily catch fish by blasting it with impact magic or forcibly draining the water. He carefully folded his black coat and placed it on the ground, then rolled up the sleeves of his shirt.

Just then, something popped out of the water.

"Hwah!"

It exhaled, spitting water out of its mouth. Asel prepared to attack with magic, but frowned when he realized that the creature was a woman.

She was entirely white. Her shirt, as well as her hair, were white. Her skin was pale to the point of being transparent, and her long, pointed ears hinted at her race.

"...Elf?"

Asel muttered, but then realized that her Aura was very murky for an elf, and changed his mind.

He could smell blood mixed in with the Mana. Among the various races distributed across the continent, only one race gave off such a strong scent of blood.

"Vampire."

"Huh?"

The woman heard him and turned to look at Asel. Then, she smiled brightly as if she had found a friend and shouted.

"Help me!"

"..."

"I can't catch any fish! If you help me catch some, I'll share them with you!"

Asel stared at her innocent face, then chuckled and placed his palm over the surface of the water. As soon as he unleashed his magic, a small explosion occurred beneath his hand. He had adjusted the power so that the explosion wouldn't reach the vampire. She made a small noise and rose out of the water.

"Are you a mage?"

"As you can see."

Asel continued to unleash explosion magic into the river. Soon, stunned fish floated to the surface. The vampire exclaimed in admiration, and Asel extracted Mana in the form of threads to catch them.

He left the ones that had been torn apart by the explosion. They were hard to clean and had few edible parts, so they weren't worth the effort. If there had been fewer stunned fish, he would have caught those too, but fortunately, there were more than five intact fish. This would be enough to get him through the day.

The vampire's eyes sparkled as she watched the fish dangling from Asel's threads.

"Wow! You caught five! I missed them all! Okay, I'll only eat one, so you can have the rest!"

"I'm not giving them to you."

"Huh?"

She made a dumb sound and turned to look at Asel. Asel let out a hollow laugh, as if asking the obvious, and said.

"I did it all myself, why would I give them to you?"

"But! ...Hmph."

The vampire couldn't argue and pouted. Asel ignored her grumbling and grabbed one of the dangling fish to clean it. He condensed Mana at his fingertips to cut open the fish's belly and pull out its organs. He neatly severed the head. It wasn't an edible part anyway.

He roughly wiped the blood off his hands in the river, brought some leaves, and started a fire. He skewered the cleaned fish on a branch and held it over the fire. After doing that five times, there were no fish left. Asel nodded in satisfaction and waited for the meat to cook.

The vampire hovered around Asel the entire time. The faint rumbling sounds were all coming from her. She must have been very hungry.

Vampires don't just feed on blood. Blood is just an essential nutrient for them to live. They also need to eat food and drink water like everyone else. He couldn't be sure since he had only read about it in books about other races, rather than observing their ecosystem directly, but judging from her reaction, it didn't seem too far off.

"I'm hungry..."

She looked at the fish being grilled to a golden brown, and when she met Asel's eyes, she whistled and pretended not to notice. Asel chuckled at the sight.

"Do you want some?"

"Yes!"

It was an immediate answer. Asel gestured for her to come closer. She ran over without hesitation and plopped down next to Asel.

Her clothes were damp from being in the water, so Asel reached out to her to use Life magic to dry them. Then she tilted her head and grabbed Asel's outstretched hand with both of her hands. Asel let out a hollow laugh at the soft sensation.

"...What are you doing?"

"Huh? Weren't you going to catch me?"

"I was going to dry your clothes."

"Ah!"

She pursed her lips and let go of Asel's hand. Asel immediately used magic to clean her clothes and tore off a piece of the properly cooked skewer to eat. The vampire watched him, and when Asel handed her the skewer, she smiled brightly and eagerly ate the meat. It was quite cute to see her cheeks bulging as she ate.

"What's your name?"

Asel asked. The vampire swallowed all the meat she had been chewing and replied.

"Elena! Elena von Valdemia! I'm from the Valdemia Duchy!"

The same surname as the name of the duchy. Asel immediately realized that she was a direct descendant of the duke.

The Valdemia Duchy was a city and country founded by vampires. Back when racial wars were rampant on the continent, they built a refuge beyond the secluded mountains in the south of the continent to avoid unnecessary fighting. The name of the leader of the vampires who led them was Valdemia. That was how the duchy began.

Unlike their gruesome name, vampires are not a warlike race. They need to drink the blood of other races to survive, but their methods are considered quite humane, so their reputation wasn't bad.

They never directly suck blood unless there was mutual consent, and they mostly bought blood for money.

If they didn't drink blood for a long time, they would become thirsty and crave blood, but the amount of blood flowing into the duchy was so large that it was more than enough to feed all the vampires. Thanks to that, thirst was as good as non-existent for them.

It seemed to be the same for Elena. Asel nodded as he looked at the half-full blood pack hanging from her waist.

"So you're a lady of the Valdemia family. Why are you trying to enroll in the academy?"

"Just because? I'm bored of being stuck in the duchy!"

It was a simpler reason than he had expected. Well, some people might think that way. Asel respected her will.

"There are other reasons too, but it's a secret."

"Okay. Eat some more. There's a lot left."

"Okay!"

Elena replied brightly and took another skewer. Asel burned the skewer he had finished, drew some water, and took a sip.

"What's your name?"

"Asel. I don't have a surname."

"I see. Then Asel! Give me a sip of your blood!"

"...? Suddenly?"

Weren't they just exchanging names? Why was she suddenly asking for blood?

Asel frowned at her words, which had omitted all the context. Elena opened her mouth urgently at his reaction.

"That, well, I was supposed to bring human blood, but I accidentally packed pig blood. I can't last a week with this..."

"...So you need my blood?"

"Yes! Blood itself is important to us, but the Mana contained in the blood is even more important. Just like elves absorb Mana through photosynthesis, and humans and demi-humans absorb Mana through food, we have to absorb Mana contained in blood to live!"

This was a new story to him. The books only contained fragmentary information, so he didn't know exactly what they gained through bloodsucking.

He knew that it was necessary for their life activities, but this was the first time he had heard about the internal situation. Asel felt intrigued and stared at Elena.

"Is the Mana you can get from pig blood limited?"

"Almost none. Animal blood isn't very good for us. We only drink it when we want to feel a tingling sensation sometimes?"

"What about a mage's blood?"

"Special treat!"

Elena's eyes sparkled as she leaned her upper body towards Asel. Her chest shook greatly with the movement.

"Aura doesn't suit us very well, so it's not very tasty. It's more edible than the blood of ordinary people, but it can't be compared to a mage's."

"So Mana suits you best."

"Yes. It's also the most expensive, hard to get, and sells out as soon as it comes out on the market, so it's hard to eat!"

"..."

"It's also delicious, and when you drink it, you get a lot of vitality. You don't even have to suck blood for a while."

"So you're saying you need to drink my blood? So you don't have to drink blood during the exam?"

Elena nodded. Asel pondered for a moment, then raised a finger and set a condition.

"It's not difficult to give you a few drops of blood. But I have to get something in return."

"I'll do anything I can!"

Elena nodded with a determined expression. Asel immediately stated his condition.

"I'm interested in Blood Magic, so I want to observe the magic you use during the exam."

"I don't use magic, I use a power called 'Blood Manipulation Technique'?"

"It doesn't matter. In the first place, Blood Magic itself is a magic that imitates Blood Manipulation Technique. If I observe it, I'll be able to get meaningful results."

There were no libraries related to Blood Magic in the Witch Council's library. The Witch Council didn't deal with heterogenous magic such as Black Magic, Blood Magic, or Corpse Manipulation, which were likely to drive people insane as they accumulated ranks.

Asel wouldn't go crazy if he learned such heterogenous magic. He knew that very well. However, that didn't mean he was going to master those magics to the extreme. It was enough to learn the principles and use a few magics that could be integrated into other types of magic or used flexibly.

Blood Magic was the beginning.

"Is it possible?"

Asel shook his finger in front of Elena and asked. Elena nodded vigorously, as if it wasn't a difficult request.

"Of course! I'll show you as much as you want."

The deal was done.

Asel immediately extracted Mana in the form of an awl and lightly pricked his finger. Then, a bright red drop of blood formed on his fingertip. Elena's eyes sparkled as she looked at the shimmering drop. Asel looked at her and asked.

"How should I give it to you? Where should I put it?"

"Ah, no. Just give it to me."

"Just like that?"

"Sprinkle it on my tongue!"

"What?"

The moment he asked that, Elena opened her mouth and stuck her tongue out. She made a sound in that state.

"Beeh..."

"...Something about this picture is weird."

Asel muttered and shook the drop of blood on his fingertip onto her long tongue. Elena closed her mouth when about five drops of blood had fallen on her tongue and savored the blood.

"...Eup?!"

Her eyes widened.