# 120 - Catfight

The Combat Department's second assignment period wasn't over yet, but the Non-Combat Department's was. True to form for those who only needed to submit individual results to complete their assignments, the Non-Combat Department had already finished all their assignments.

Saya of the Magical Engineering Department was the same. Since she had never left the academy grounds, Asel and Evelyn were able to meet her as soon as they arrived at the Merchant Guild building.

"It's been a while. Are you feeling better?"

Her office was on the top floor of the Merchant Guild. It felt rather modest, but all sorts of documents were scattered across the desk. The strong smell of paper and the scent of ink filled the air.

It was a typical Merchant Guild leader's office. Asel chuckled as he accepted the coffee cup Saya offered.

"I'm fine now. What about you?"

"I've been doing well. I managed to do well on my assignments too. More than that, I feel a little bad that I couldn't visit you in the hospital. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. The Order blocked it."

Back when Asel hadn't fully regained consciousness, the Order had prevented anyone except their own members from entering his hospital room, fearing it might negatively affect him. There were a few who barged in, but even they were a small minority.

Saya, who was capable of normal thought, naturally didn't refuse the Order's wishes and returned. It had already been two months since they had seen each other.

It couldn't be helped. Saya was juggling the academy and the Merchant Guild's work, so she was spending busy days, and it probably would have been difficult for her to make personal time.

Of course, if Asel had requested an interview, she would have accepted it immediately, but Asel didn't want to bother her when he didn't have any particular business. It would be rude to waste her time with pointless conversation.

But today was an exception.

"Anyway, about the purpose of my visit today."

Considering Saya's busy schedule, Asel went straight to the point instead of engaging in lengthy small talk. Saya, who had been listening with a soft smile at first, gradually changed her expression to a serious one as Asel continued.

"Um... so if I understand correctly. Asel, you've come to get the materials needed to make a Magical Engineering artifact for your sister, Evelyn, is that right?"

"Exactly."

"...Hmm. What you need is Shadow Devourer's hide and Mana-Conducting Metal. And Metal Solvent with acid and Wanderer's Thread. So, four things in total?"

Saya asked Evelyn, who was sitting next to Asel. Evelyn nodded vigorously.

"Yes, Guild Leader!"

"None of them are particularly difficult to obtain. But they're all quite expensive materials, so could you tell me what you're planning to make?"

"Shock Emission Gauntlets!"

"...That's the first time I've heard of that."

Saya had seen many Magical Engineering blueprints, but she had never heard of the item Evelyn mentioned. Shock Emission Gauntlets. It sounded like something that could exist as a Magical artifact, but it would be difficult to make with Magical Engineering, wouldn't it?

"Of course. I designed it myself!"

"...You designed it yourself?"

"Yes! I brought the blueprint with me!"

Evelyn quickly handed Saya the half-finished blueprint she had kept in her arms. Saya received the blueprint with a dubious look.

Designing Magical Engineering artifacts yourself was very difficult. Modifying existing items was possible for talented people, but creating blueprints was an extraordinary feat.

The properties of the materials, as well as the scientific and magical reactions that occur when substances with different properties meet, all had to be known. Even for simple Magical Engineering artifacts, the period until the blueprint was created was often decades.

And yet, Shock Emission Gauntlets. Just hearing it made the complex design process seem obvious. It would probably take dozens of gray-haired engineers several years of head-scratching to create a proper item.

'I feel sorry for Evelyn, but I'm not that excited.'

That's what she thought, but Saya decided to read the blueprint Evelyn handed her carefully.

"..."

Before long, her eyes changed.

"Shadow Devourers have the characteristic of devouring all physical damage. They can also change their appearance into specific tool forms."

"That's why they're like natural enemies to warriors. They can only be subjugated with a mage."

"That's right."

Saya, who had suddenly opened her mouth, continued to speak while looking at Evelyn, who immediately answered.

"And Wanderer's Thread has the opposite properties. It can be easily cut by physical force, but it firmly blocks attacks made of Mana. That's why mages often wear armor made of Wanderer's Thread when facing other mages."

"That's right. And if you add metal with high Mana conductivity, a magical reaction occurs, and Mana is stored inside the metal. However, it can't be released, so if it accumulates beyond a certain amount, it will eventually explode."

I have no idea what they're talking about.

Asel thought so as he mentally constructed a Formula. Even in the midst of this, the two continued their heated conversation.

"I know that much."

"Because it's a widely known characteristic. But the moment you pour Metal Solvent here, the story changes."

Evelyn licked her lips with her tongue and continued.

"The moment you pour solvent mixed with acid, enough to dissolve even the Mana contained in the metal, into a structure woven with thread and metal. The properties change completely. The metal that could contain Mana rejects Mana and can only contain physical damage. And if you add Shadow Devourer's hide on top of this? A magical reaction occurs, and the hide's property of absorbing shock is completely twisted to emit it."

A long explanation. Asel's eyes widened at Evelyn's unfamiliar appearance, and Saya's eyes sparkled.

"So, you're going to make Emission Gauntlets in that way?"

"That's right. But you also have to calculate the exact ratio of the materials that go into the making process, and you have to get the mixing and the mold right so that the harmony isn't disturbed. The mixing has been done well so far, but I'm having trouble with the mold. I feel like I can do it if I try a little more, but the materials are all gone, so I came to get them."

Evelyn finished speaking with a bright smile. Asel sipped his coffee with a sullen expression, and Saya narrowed her eyes as if contemplating.

"...It's not difficult to get the materials for you."

Before long, Saya's mouth opened again.

"In the first place, I personally owe Asel a debt. No matter how much it costs. I was going to get the materials no matter what..."

"..."

"I think I'll have to make one more additional offer."

Saya said, looking straight at Evelyn.

"Would you be willing to supply our Merchant Guild with the item?"

"...Supply?"

"Yes. I'm very good at smelling money. I have a feeling that if this is sold on the market, we can make a huge profit. The moment the item is made based on the blueprint, we can also go into mass production."

"Uh, um..."

Just as Evelyn was tilting her head at the unexpected offer.

"Free provision of materials. All net profits will be provided to Evelyn for about three months from the moment the item is released on the market. After that, we will divide it at a 7:3 ratio, and the blueprint will be exclusively provided to our Merchant Guild. As a condition, our Merchant Guild will fully support you if other products come to mind in the future, how about it?"

Saya made a groundbreaking offer. Even Asel, who knew nothing about the Merchant Guild's work, thought it was a considerable condition.

However, Evelyn, who had already learned the importance of caution in contracts from her teacher Wiheim, opened her mouth with a faint smile instead of immediately accepting.

"I think I should see the contract first."

\*\*\*

Recently, Ena had been spending very happy days. It was only natural, as she had connected with the person she loved and even had a physical relationship.

Losing her rank was still a painful matter, but she wasn't the type to be greatly attached to her level in the first place, so she didn't feel powerless. Only a slight regret remained.

'The entrance to the Small Labyrinth will reopen after winter. Let's not be too attached.'

Ena thought so as she wriggled into Asel's bed. Smelling the scent of the clothes he had been wearing until morning.

Perhaps because Evelyn had recently settled down, his scent, which used to fill the room, had been partially erased and replaced with Evelyn's scent.

As a result, unlike in the past when she could feel like she was being hugged by Asel just by lying in bed, she now had to bring his clothes directly to her nose to feel his scent strongly.

It was unfortunate, but it wasn't too bad either. Ena chuckled and curled up around Asel's body.

And at that moment.

Knock knock.

Someone lightly knocked on the dormitory door. Ena's face, which had been smiling loosely, instantly hardened, and she stood up with a blank expression.

'Who is it?'

As far as Ena remembered, only women came to Asel's room.

They were all enemies who had to be eliminated in order to monopolize Asel. Ena deliberately draped Asel's coat over her shoulders and strode towards the dormitory door.

'Is it the red-haired one? Or the mosquito? There was also a short blonde one. Could it be her?'

There were too many candidates coming to mind. Ena clicked her tongue and grabbed the doorknob tightly.

She had considered getting pregnant to deal with the other women for sure, but she had put it off for a while because she didn't think it was the right thing to do. Would it be better to withdraw the contraceptive magic and force ovulation even now?

"..."

She opened the dormitory door while thinking all sorts of things.

At the same time, what came into view was a white-haired vampire with useless flabby flesh and a small blonde noble.

"Oh, Asel! I'm back after finishing my assignment! I'll only suck you once today!"

"...Please refrain from saying things that could be misunderstood, Elena. Anyway, it's been a while, Asel. How have you been... um?"

The moment Ellen, who was sighing, turned her head towards Asel's room. She made eye contact with Ena, who had a cold expression.

Ellen's face stiffened at the appearance of an unimaginable being, and Elena widened her blood-red eyes and tilted her head.

"Why is Grandma here?"

"...Huh."

Ellen's face turned even paler at her unconsciously uttered words.

"...Grandma?"

Conversely, Ena's face was filled with anger.

# 121 - A Mess

“Ah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

Hehe.

Elena scratched the back of her head and laughed foolishly. Of course, that didn’t ease Ena’s mood, which was as cold as ice. She spat out her words with a frosty expression.

“It’s not summer yet. I don’t plan on letting mosquitoes in the house.”

“Oh, is that so? But I’m not a mosquito.”

“Anything that sucks blood is a mosquito.”

“Could it be? Is the Beginning actually a racist? Asel would be disappointed if he knew~”

“……You’re not saying a word, are you? How cheeky.”

Ena clicked her tongue and summoned her Mana.

Normally, Ena could only muster about the power of the fourth tier, but now, receiving Mana from Asel, it was different. While she couldn’t compare to her prime, she could still turn the vampire in front of her into a roast in an instant.

Naturally, Elena was aware of this. She might not know that Ena had lost her strength, but her power was no longer a secret. Even those who had just begun their journey in magic understood the significance of the name The Beginning.

Elena was no exception. She was acutely aware that a girl who barely reached her chest could erase an entire city from a map if she set her mind to it. It was she who had left indelible marks on the academy.

The majesty of the top-ranked wizard one would not want to encounter on the battlefield was indeed formidable. However, Elena was not intimidated in front of Ena at all.

Because she knew. She knew that Ena was Asel’s mentor and had special feelings for him.

There was no way someone like her would harm Elena recklessly. The moment she touched Asel’s friend without his permission, it would be the end for her. Elena was well aware of this, which is why she did not exert her power against Grace.

Was Ena any different?

“Get lost.”

Surprisingly, she was. Ena immediately shot a bolt of lightning toward Elena’s body. Elena, who had never expected an attack from a distance, let out a shriek and transformed her body into a puddle to evade it.

KWA-BOOM!!

The lightning barely grazed her hair and struck the wall, creating a massive hole through which the early summer breeze rushed in.

Maidens walking down the hallway couldn’t process the shocking situation and dropped their laundry on the floor. Other top-tier students who had moved into the dormitory after midterms peeked their heads out at the commotion.

“Crazy, crazy……!”

A pool of blood, as if a murder had occurred. With only her face visible above it, Elena glared at Ena with a pale expression and murmured.

“Are you really trying to do this?”

“Then what? Can you win?”

Ena looked down at Elena and burst into laughter.

“Talking big when you’re crawling on the floor. Let’s see if you can say that after I fry your brain.”

“Your tone is so grandmotherly! My grandmother doesn’t talk like that! You old hag!”

“I’ll kill you.”

Ena opened her eyes fiercely and raised Asel’s Mana to its limit. Elena gasped and prepared to dive through the hole, while Ellen gritted her teeth, ready to withstand Ena’s attack at that moment.

“What’s going on? Another ambush?”

“Ugh…… Asel…… I feel dizzy…….”

Asel, who had flown in on a Mana thread from beyond the broken wall, appeared. He set Evelyn down after layering her with various defensive formulas and quickly began assessing the situation.

“……Hmm?”

It didn’t take long to assess.

Asel confirmed the melted Elena, Ena emitting white and dark blue lightning from her entire body, and Ellen staring at him with the gaze of a savior, piecing together the puzzle in his mind.

“……Ha.”

Finally, a deep sigh escaped Asel’s lips. He forced himself to ignore the gazes of the students and maids looking this way and turned to Ena.

“What are you doing, Master?”

“Oh, no, I was just trying to catch a mosquito……”

“Why is Elena a mosquito, Master…….”

Asel rubbed his neck with one hand while staring at Ena. By now, Elena had returned to her normal self and clung to Asel, on the verge of tears.

“Waaah! Ah, Asel! Your master, your master……!”

“Hold on. There’s no way a master would use magic against someone who hasn’t done anything.”

“Okay.”

Unlike Ena, Elena obediently retreated at Asel’s words.

Asel clicked his tongue while looking at the fidgeting Ena, the sulking Elena, and the relieved Ellen.

“……Let’s go inside for now. There are too many eyes on us.”

Evelyn’s contract was successfully concluded. It was a deal so favorable to Evelyn that one could feel how much Saya had compromised. No matter which merchant she went to, they wouldn’t offer better terms than hers, so there was no reason to refuse her proposal.

Thus, a connection was formed between Evelyn and Saya.

It was a good thing. For Evelyn, who had almost no friends her age, forming a bond with a merchant of a similar age was something to be welcomed.

After chatting a bit more with Saya, Asel and Evelyn parted ways, promising to meet again later. It wouldn’t be long before she contacted him, saying she had gathered all the materials.

All that was left was to wait. Having gained an unexpected harvest, Asel and Evelyn returned to the dormitory in quite a good mood.

And this was the result. Asel sighed for what felt like the umpteenth time while looking at Ena and Elena sitting across from him.

“Ha……”

“Are you okay?”

Ellen, sitting next to him, asked with a worried expression. Asel waved his hand dismissively, signaling that he was fine, then stared at the two with bleary eyes.

“So, according to the only witness, Ellen……”

His gaze suddenly turned to Ena.

“On the occasion of finishing the second assignment, the master first called Elena a mosquito, and Elena merely responded to that. Is that correct, Master?”

“…….”

“Master.”

“Y-yeah, that’s true, but……”

Ena chewed her lips while glaring at Elena.

“She said something about whether I was fast or not first. Hearing that, of course, I got angry.”

“Is that true?”

Asel asked Elena. She nodded with a confident expression.

“Yep!”

“……Why did you say that?”

“Well…… because it’s true? You promised! You said you’d let me suck blood a few times a week! I just said that!”

“That’s…… true, but, uh, ha…….”

Asel couldn’t come up with a proper response and ruffled his hair in frustration.

At that moment, Ena narrowed her eyes and spoke up.

“Wait a minute. Asel, did you allow a vampire to suck your blood?”

“Ah, ah! Wait!! You can’t say that!!!”

Elena suddenly interrupted Ena’s statement, but Ena continued with a serious expression, undeterred.

“If you allow a vampire to suck your blood directly, the person being drained becomes addicted to the act. Eventually, they’ll beg to have their blood drawn.”

“……Huh?”

“A wizard can resist to some extent, but once addicted, they show even stronger symptoms than ordinary people. Vampires can control the level of addiction, but they rarely weaken it on purpose.”

“…….”

Asel’s gaze creaked back to Elena. She deliberately avoided his gaze and smiled brightly.

“E-ehhehe!”

“…….”

“I-I didn’t mean to deceive you! I just missed the timing to explain—”

“No more bloodsucking from now on. If it’s absolutely necessary, give it in packs.”

“Ah, no!”

Elena clung to Asel desperately, on the verge of tears.

“I-I never charmed you in the first place! We don’t need that between us, right? Think about it! Have I ever thought about wanting to be drained again after you’ve drained me? No, right? That’s right, isn’t it?”

“It seems like it’s a power called Charm. Such an unsettling name.”

“Ah, no! Trust my sincerity, Asel! Ah, okay, I’ll be honest. I’ve only used it with all my strength once! Just that one time! I haven’t done it since!”

“……Elena.”

Ellen, who had been listening to their conversation, interjected with a gloomy expression.

“Stop it. It’s painful to watch……”

“Shut up! You don’t know how important this is to me—”

“Ugh. When did my friend fall so low……!”

Ellen, cutting off Elena’s words, grabbed Asel’s hand and spoke with a desperate expression.

“Please, Asel……! This is my fault for not being able to control her while being by her side. I’ll personally educate her, so can you forgive her just this once……?”

“……?”

Asel stared at Ellen, wondering if she was joking, but soon realized that she was serious. He let out a deep sigh and pushed both Ellen and Elena away.

“Okay…… I get it for now. I wasn’t even angry in the first place. There’s no need for forgiveness or anything, so stop making a fuss.”

“Indeed, a seventh-tier great wizard……! Your composure is extraordinary!”

“Ugh, stop making a fuss.”

Asel ruffled Ellen’s hair, which was still chattering beside him.

“Ah! Ah! No!”

As her meticulously styled hair got messed up, Ellen let out a cute scream. Elena made the most pitiful face she could muster and rubbed her face against Asel’s shoulder, while Ena desperately tried to pull Elena away from Asel.

At that moment, Evelyn, who had been holed up in the lab as soon as she entered the room, came out to get a drink. She stretched and squinted one eye, then saw Asel being tormented by the girls and smiled brightly.

“Are you tormenting Asel? I want to join!”

She immediately jumped into Asel’s arms and hugged him tightly.

At the same time, the dormitory door burst open, revealing gray hair.

“The genius of the Aurora Magic Tower, Celine. I just finished my assignment and arrived at Asel’s room, which is inexplicably open. Prepare to welcome me, as I will soon rise to the sixth tier.”

Celine, adorned with starlight, appeared dazzlingly. It was a disaster caused by forgetting to lock the door. Asel pushed aside Evelyn’s black hair that was obstructing his view and shouted at Celine.

“Get out……!”

“……What’s going on here? Did you get stabbed or something?”

“Asel!”

The moment the word “stab” came out of Celine’s mouth, the door opened again, and red hair rushed in urgently.

“I heard the dormitory wall was smashed. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Does it hurt? Did any aftereffects come back?!”

Grace, holding an apron and a kitchen knife, appeared in the dormitory. Asel felt his mind going blank and simply closed his eyes.

“Open your eyes, Asel! Witness this sister’s torment directly!”

“Just let me see once! I swear, I won’t do it again! You know I’m a good kid!”

“Ugh……! Get away, mosquito girl……!”

“Ugh…… my hair…….”

“Haha, this is a mess. I love it.”

“What are these girls?! Everyone out! Asel still needs to rest! I’ll take care of him, so everyone out!”

There were six people in the room, but instead of a conversation, there was only a collective monologue.

‘Ah.’

Asel gave up on resolving the situation and let all his strength drain away.

It was summer.

# 122 - Professor Renatus and the Strange Academy

Time passed, and the second assignment period came to an end. The once-empty academy regained its vitality, and conversations about the results of the assignments filled the air.

Among the first-year students, who had collaborated with mercenaries for the first time, there was an overflow of excitement and energy. This was their first experience working alongside those who made a living in the field. The first assignment had been conducted solely among the academy students, so for them, the second assignment was indeed a first.

Some of those who had just returned from handling requests were so intoxicated by the toughness of the mercenaries that they shouted about wanting to become mercenaries in the future.

It was a childish notion. As they progressed through the years, they would come to understand just how murky the mercenary industry was.

The third and fourth-year students had already grown weary from collaborating with them. As a result, unlike the first-years, their expressions were not bright even after completing the second assignment. In fact, they appeared even darker.

“...At this rate, I might really have to work as a mercenary. With my grades, joining a knight order is out of the question...”

“Still, a mercenary who can use Aura is among the top tier, right? Making a living there might not be so bad.”

“Maybe. But would my family ever recognize me for being a mercenary? Just not getting kicked out for saying nonsense would be a blessing.”

“...That’s true.”

The fourth-year students had only a few months left until graduation. It was time to shed their student status and find respectable jobs.

For the top-tier students, there was no problem. They had already been scouted, and their career paths were set. However, the mid-tier and lower-tier students faced a bleak future.

There were ways to join the knight order of their family, but in many cases, if one’s family wasn’t prestigious, they were often disregarded. Some families didn’t even have a knight order to begin with.

“...Sigh.”

They had entered the academy dreaming of a rosy future, yet the reality was dark. Even after completing the second assignment, their expressions were poor, all for that reason.

Despite knowing the darkness of the mercenary industry, a vague future loomed over them, suggesting they might end up joining that world and wielding a sword for the rest of their lives.

On the other hand, the wizards fared slightly better. With far fewer in number than warriors, wizards often found jobs in research labs or elsewhere at high salaries.

However, for them, the goal was to join the Magic Tower or the Alliance, and entering a research lab was often seen as a failure. Still, their situation was better than that of the knight department students.

In this regard, Asel had a significant advantage even before entering the academy.

As a seventh-tier Electromancer belonging to the Witch Council, he was treated specially within the wizarding community. The status that name carried was beyond imagination.

The seventh tier was a realm where considerable combat-oriented professors were distributed. The very fact that he was here as a student was unusual.

Even Professor Firenze had quickly suggested that Asel skip grades and become his assistant.

Of course, Asel declined. Graduating from the academy was his goal, but he had no intention of being trapped in the academy by skipping grades. He wanted to avoid being demoted to a status worse than that of a slave, whether as an assistant professor or a graduate student from his past life.

“I should just take it easy and enjoy my youth. Before that, I need to solve the riddle given by the demon.”

Asel thought this while resting his chin on his desk, staring at the podium.

A week after the second assignment ended. The classroom for the common subjects of the Magical Department, with final exams approaching next week.

There were about ten minutes left until the start of the newly implemented class called [Practical Combat Magic Application].

Having just finished lunch, Asel opened Aleph, which he had hung at his waist, and fixed it to his face to catch a quick nap. Aleph, who had been tormented by Asel’s research for days, immediately rebelled.

“Please let go of this, Master. How dare you kiss me? It’s too early. At least do it after I’ve taken form.”

“Kiss? It was just my lips barely touching the paper.”

“To me, that’s no different from a kiss. Don’t underestimate me as a book. I am also a proper ‘human’ with a feminine persona.”

“Just be quiet. I can’t sleep.”

“No. Don’t sleep. You, who toy with me, should not sleep.”

“...To be jealous of a mere book. My life is truly tragic.”

Aleph responded with a voice that seemed puzzled by Asel’s grumbling.

“Jealousy? So this feeling is called jealousy. Understood.”

Just as Asel was about to use a weak sleep spell on himself instead of responding to her mumbling...

“Hello.”

Someone plopped down in the empty seat next to him. Asel glanced at Aleph to see who had come.

He recognized the voice immediately, so there was no surprise. Asel chuckled and covered his face with the book again.

“It seems the words of a fifth-tier weakling are hard to hear. You should at least be at the sixth tier.”

“...What?”

“Tsk tsk. The laws of wizards have collapsed. Since when could a fifth-tier speak to a seventh-tier? The world is in chaos, truly!”

“Are you insane?”

Celine immediately contorted her face and poked Asel’s side with her mana-infused finger.

Tiddiding!!

Of course, it was blocked by the Shield as if it were a matter of course. Asel checked the Shield, which had not even a scratch, and burst into laughter.

“Pfft!”

Celine’s face turned bright red at the sound of his blatant laughter.

“Hey! Don’t laugh! You had a time like this too!”

“I rose from the fifth tier to the sixth tier in two months. I don’t remember that time well.”

“......”

Celine was left speechless. With her mouth agape, she grabbed Asel’s arm and chewed on it.

Of course, the thin Shield she had layered did not allow her delicate teeth to penetrate. This fact only made Celine more irritated.

At that moment, Elena, with her white hair tied up neatly, plopped down in the empty seat to Asel’s left.

“Hello, Asel!”

Elena greeted Asel with a lively expression. Asel, still not removing Aleph from his face, replied.

“Yeah, hello.”

“...Huh. I wish you’d at least look at my face when you greet me...”

“That’s the punishment for trying to charm me.”

Asel pushed Elena’s face away as she tried to link arms with him and continued speaking.

“From now until the vacation, no contact with me. No bloodsucking. Keep conversations brief.”

“You’re being too harsh!”

“No, I have no intention of changing my mind. Go away.”

“Ugh!!”

Elena screamed, but Asel’s attitude remained unchanged.

This incident was entirely Elena’s fault. When she had first tried to suck blood from the clock tower, she had unknowingly cast a charm, and although she claimed she hadn’t done it since, whether that was true or not, it was clear she had failed to inform him of her addiction.

“If my mana hadn’t had absolute defensive capabilities against external interference, I would have been Elena’s slave that day.”

It was a horrifying thought. Becoming a vampire’s blood bag. No matter how much Asel trusted Elena, he had no intention of becoming prey that fell into a trap.

“I-I was going to release you right away if you got addicted! Trust me!!!”

Elena pleaded from the side, but Asel’s expression showed no change. He thoroughly pushed away Elena’s contact with magic and protected his clothes from being chewed on with the Shield while trying to catch some sleep.

“AAAAH!!!! AAAAAAH!!!!!”

It was impossible to sleep with Aleph screaming in his head. Asel seriously contemplated whether to confine Aleph to the lab going forward as he crossed his arms.

In the meantime, Celine suddenly seemed to remember something and spat out Asel’s arm, turning to him.

“Speaking of which, this class... All students from the Magical Department can attend regardless of their year. It’s a free subject that doesn’t count towards grades, so there probably aren’t many people in the classroom right now...”

“Hmm.”

“Well, it can’t be helped. There was no explanation about the class, and the name of the professor in charge was just filled with question marks. If I were in your position, I wouldn’t have taken this class either.”

“But why are you here?”

At Asel’s incredulous question, Celine laughed playfully.

“I thought that someone who is crazy about magic would definitely attend this class, so I followed.”

“......”

“The biggest reason is that there’s no class at this time, but more than that, I’m genuinely curious—why is your mentor here?”

Just as Celine said that, lunchtime ended, and class time arrived. The clock in the classroom chimed like an owl alarm, and soon footsteps could be heard in the hallway.

Once class time began, only professors or assistant professors could enter the classroom. So, the identity of those approaching was undoubtedly that of the professor in charge of the class.

“Huh? There are multiple footsteps.”

However, for some reason, the footsteps sounded overlapping. It was as if dozens of people were hurriedly moving their feet. Celine tilted her head in confusion, and just as Asel was about to remove Aleph from his face...

Creak!

The back door of the classroom opened, and professors rushed in. The students who recognized their faces instantly stiffened, but the professors paid no mind and found empty seats to sit in. To make matters worse, they even took out notebooks and pens with eyes burning with academic fervor.

“Ah, no. Why are the professors...?”

Celine muttered at the bizarre scene she was witnessing for the first time while attending the academy. At the same time, the front door of the classroom opened, and a girl walked in with a click-clack sound.

“...Huh?”

“...Heeek!”

Celine and Elena reacted differently upon seeing her face. Asel chuckled and leaned slightly forward.

Not just the two of them, but various reactions erupted from all around. Some even rubbed their eyes, wondering if they were seeing things.

However, the girl who entered the classroom through the front door paid them no mind and stared directly at Asel, a gentle smile gracing her lips.

“......”

Soon, upon seeing the two women sitting next to him, her eyes crinkled. Instinctively, the girl sparked with electricity, but upon noticing Asel’s sharp gaze, she withdrew the current.

“...Sigh.”

Overwhelmed by his gaze, the girl let out a deep sigh and stood in front of the enormous blackboard. She quietly scanned the various students sitting in the classroom before finally opening her mouth in a soft voice.

“It’s me.”

# 123 - Professor Renatus and the Strange Academy (2)

The classes in the Magical Department are, of course, attended only by wizards. And whether they like it or not, wizards had no choice but to know the name of The Beginning.

It was only natural. Although she had never published a thesis or shared her combat style or methods for dealing with other wizards, there were still plenty of records about her. Each one was like a textbook for combat wizards.

With a single gesture, she splits the sky. The falling lightning scorches the earth and devastates the city to the point where its shape is barely recognizable.

There is no blood or corpses left in her wake. Everything burns away.

Even Flame Sorcerers tremble at her excessive prowess. A living witness who has made it clear to everyone that mercy is nothing but a luxury. A monster that became an object of fear even among her own kind during the species war.

Among the students and professors present here, there was not a single person who had not read the records about Ena. Knowing about her was the first prerequisite for wizards to engage in combat.

That is why it is all the more astonishing.

That The Beginning, Ena Renatus, known as one of the asymmetrical powers living in Wiheim, is standing at the podium with an expressionless face, conducting the class.

“I think you all know what magic is, so I’ll skip the explanation.”

The professors were not very surprised since they were aware that Ena was coming, but the students were not. They had merely signed up for the class to alleviate boredom or satisfy their academic curiosity, and suddenly a monster had appeared to conduct the lesson...

‘Is this a dream?’

It was only natural for such thoughts to cross one’s mind. Asel, with a wry smile, closed the jaw of Elena, who was gaping in disbelief.

“Um, um, The Beginning.”

At that moment, a female student wearing glasses raised her hand and spoke to Ena. Ena cast her gaze as if to say, “Go ahead.”

“Ah, no matter how much we are wizards, compared to The Beginning, we are like a drop in the bucket... If possible, I would like to know what kind of magic The Beginning thinks is magic...”

True to her usual passionate nature about magic, she chose to pursue her academic curiosity rather than waste time pondering why Ena was here.

Asel understood her intent and let out a small laugh.

The value of magic varies for each wizard. Some dabble in magic simply because they have talent, some to survive, and others to earn money.

While the study of magic inherently requires immense talent, merely entering the field is akin to proving one’s ability. However, there are significant differences in talent. There are many wizards who spend their entire lives stuck at the fifth tier, never having used high-level magic before dying.

Of course, this is irrelevant to wizards who have no particular attachment to magic. But how easy is that?

The most necessary virtue to enter the world of magic is none other than arrogance. One must possess overwhelming confidence and belief in oneself to invoke the mysteries of this world where gods exist.

Do such individuals truly have no desire for ascension in tier?

Of course not.

Even Asel, who had smoothly broken through to the sixth tier, harbored a desire for ascension. If he felt that way, how much more so would other wizards? Even if they claim to be fine, they are likely boiling inside.

Ultimately, the continuous emergence of those who ascend tiers through human sacrifices or sorcery is also due to this.

That is why it is only natural to be curious.

Among the few great wizards on the continent. Among them, the strongest Electromancer. A master of Electrification Art, with only three users to date, who has ascended to the eighth tier solely through raw power and enlightenment.

As wizards ascend in tier, they must shed their arrogance and realize humility. However, very few actually achieve this. Even if they do, their abilities often fall short, preventing them from reaching higher tiers.

A pure great wizard is an extraordinary figure who does not fit into either category.

Logically speaking, Ena is the same.

“Hmm.”

However, what the female student overlooked was that Ena did not ascend in tier through enlightenment or deep contemplation, but rather transcended tiers naturally while wandering the battlefield.

“And everyone, come out.”

It was also her surprisingly aggressive nature.

“I’ll tell you what magic is.”

Thanks to that, a thunderstorm fell upon the previously calm class.

In the practice room of the Magical Department at the academy. Normally, it should be filled with scarecrows absorbing mana, but only the students and Ena remained.

“Hey, hey. That’s...!”

“It’s The Beginning. The Beginning has come to destroy the academy again!!”

The second-year students, who were in the middle of a practical class, experienced post-traumatic stress, but Ena didn’t even glance at them. She merely wore a vague expression while looking at the lined-up students and professors.

“About five minutes.”

She extended a single finger while gazing at the tense-faced students.

“For about five minutes, I’ll face all of you at full power. Since I’m in a pretty weakened state, no one will die or get hurt even if I go all out.”

“...Are you serious?”

Firenze, who was among the professors, spoke up. Ena nodded with an indifferent expression.

“Should I say something ridiculous then?”

“...”

“Originally, magic is learned through experience. Unless you’re a genius like Asel, it’s much better for dullards like you to roll around in an environment closer to actual combat than to tremble for a hundred days. That’s how you realize what magic is and gain insight. Right, Asel?”

Ena, who had been speaking in a cold voice, suddenly turned to Asel and smiled brightly. In an instant, everyone’s gaze shifted to Asel, who smiled wryly and nodded.

“That’s true. I also got hit a lot when I was still inexperienced.”

“I don’t particularly remember hitting you.”

“You scolded me with words. You cast a debate sword technique on a wizard at the fourth tier, and I lost, so I still vividly remember your harsh criticism.”

“Did I...?”

“Usually, the perpetrator doesn’t remember.”

Asel said with a laugh, and Ena chewed her lips in embarrassment.

She had the unmistakable face of a girl. Some of the boys blushed at her appearance, and the girls whispered among themselves about her stunning beauty. However, the professors, Elena and Celine, who knew that a wizard centuries old was hidden within, frowned and averted their gazes.

“Anyway.”

At that moment, Ena’s face turned cold as ice again. She pulled out a small vial she had kept in her pocket and narrowed her eyes.

“The moment I drink this, class starts, so everyone get ready. Asel, you step out for a moment.”

“Yes. But, Master, that...”

Instead of answering, Ena blushed. Asel squeezed his eyes shut and moved to a corner of the practice room.

Aleph, who had sensed his embarrassment, curiously asked.

[What is it that makes you react like that?]

‘You don’t need to know.’

[Books are symbols of knowledge. I have the right to know as well.]

‘Shut up.’

Asel roughly dismissed her question and brushed his hair back. Ena cleared her throat and briefly met Asel’s gaze before opening the vial and gulping down the thick white liquid inside.

“...Ha, no way.”

Elena, with her sensitive sense of smell, guessed the contents of the vial and grimaced, while Ena quickly tucked the now-empty vial into her pocket and unleashed a brilliant white lightning from her entire body.

Mana surged within her. It wasn’t comparable to her prime, but it was still a sufficiently satisfying power that enveloped her body. Ena wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and scattered her azure aura.

“Don’t just stand there, come on. Class time is ending.”

“Then I won’t hold back!”

As soon as she finished speaking, Firenze launched himself, enveloped in wind.

Firenze was at the seventh tier. No matter how much mana he received, Ena’s overall spell power would significantly decrease. Logically, it should be normal for him to be overwhelmed rather than evenly matched.

However, there was no change in Ena’s expression. With an indifferent look, she caught Firenze’s neck with a flash-like gesture and slammed him to the ground.

Boom!!

With that, lightning erupted from the ground in four directions. The destructive energy of the pure white lightning fell near the students who had yet to move, instantly incapacitating them.

“Gaaah!!”

“G-g-g-g-gah!!!”

The students screamed in pain as if their nerves were being fried, their muscles twitching uncontrollably.

Normally, they would have turned to ash upon contact, but now, due to her weakened state, she twisted the direction of her power to amplify speed and pain instead of destruction. As a result, even a slight brush would make their brains scream.

“I’ve adjusted it so you won’t faint, so don’t worry too much.”

Of course, she controlled the output. No matter how ruthless Ena was, she had no intention of inflicting extreme pain on her opponents even in this class.

Perhaps, instead of severing their nerves, they would feel a burning sensation akin to suffering second-degree burns on their skin.

‘This should be enough.’

Objectively, it was far from sufficient, but in Ena’s standards, even this felt insufficient.

Education should be conducted similarly to real combat. Allowing leeway was one of the areas Ena would never concede.

But what could be done? It was still the first day of class, so she could only gradually raise the level.

‘That’s fine. After all, I need to gauge the level of the academy students. Moreover...’

Ena looked down at Firenze, who was struggling in her grip, with an expressionless face as she brushed away the winds pouring in from all directions.

“What kind of professor is this?”

With a crackle!!!

Pure white lightning exploded from her entire body. She glared at the other professors, who were still frozen, with a displeased frown.

“What kind of professors are those who can’t even overwhelm a talented wizard at the sixth tier? I doubt they have the qualifications to teach anyone.”

“...Huh, a talented, sixth-tier, cough, wizard, you say?”

At that moment, Firenze, held in Ena’s grip, pushed against her forearm with both hands and glared at her.

“Stop talking nonsense!”

In that instant, a circular wind compressed from his feet and head, forming a massive storm area that sent Ena flying far away.

“Cough! Hack, cough!”

The small handprints clearly left on his neck and the remnants of the pure white lightning continued to burn, gnawing at his flesh.

The distinct traces of lightning that could not be easily erased even with mana. Even though it was swung without any technique, the intent and imagery contained within were merciless.

‘What kind of nonsense is this? Sixth tier? Ridiculous.’

Which sixth-tier wizard uses magic imbued with imagery? Spitting out dried blood, he stared at Ena, who was pinned against the wall and unmoving.

“If you’re all going to just stand there, get out.”

Firenze declared, wrapping wind around his wrists.

“I’ll take all the precious opportunities for myself.”

“I’ll support you.”

Celine stood beside Firenze and slowly formed a hand sign. With that, brilliant starlight began to rise, and the rotating celestial body centered around Celine grew larger, beginning to acquire thermal energy and physical power.

That was the signal. The students and professors, who had been trembling and motionless until now, began to chant the magic they had each learned, their expressions resolute.

Murmurs echoed from all directions, quiet yet loud. Asel wore an intrigued expression at the sight of more than a dozen wizards chanting simultaneously for the first time, and at that moment, Elena, wielding a massive blood-red scythe, bent her body with a fierce gaze.

Clap.

Ena clapped her small hands together, producing a quiet sound.

Soon.

The sound became a violent thunderclap.

[Thunderous Breakthrough]

Boom!!

Lightning burst forth to the range of the sound, electrocuting the air and organic matter in an instant. Several students who had approached Ena to land their spells screamed as they collapsed, and Ena walked out, brushing the dirt from her head with an annoyed expression.

She glared at Firenze, who was grinning maniacally, and her lips moved.

“Who told you to grab me without permission? The only man I’ve ever allowed to touch me is one, and he’s forever.”

“...Huh.”

“That’s unpleasant. You’re going to faint today.”

As Ena spat that out, the moment she shook off the arm that Firenze had grabbed, Elena accelerated her body and rapidly approached Ena, swinging her scythe as if to cleave her in two. However, Ena merely flicked her finger to block the attack.

“Reduce your killing intent. Do you really think I’ll reveal how you’re attacking? Is your intelligence lacking because you’re like a mosquito?”

“If you call me a mosquito one more time—”

“Go ahead.”

Ena interrupted Elena’s words.

Crackle!!

Lightning writhed at her feet.

“What are you going to do about it?”

Boom!!

The lightning that erupted from her feet surged upward, engulfing Elena’s scythe and arm.

# 124 - Professor Renatus and the Strange Academy (3)

Elena's blood is different from ordinary blood. It moves solely according to her will and does not easily disappear or scatter even under external interference.

It had to be this way again. The scythe made from her blood and the accelerated body. No matter how powerful the opponent was, as long as it was unstable and wavering, it was theoretically impossible for it to completely vanish.

But.

Crackle!!!

The surging lightning burned Elena's arms and cleanly erased the blood-red scythe. Elena grimaced in pain as if her flesh were on fire and leaped back.

‘…It’s more of a destructive phenomenon caused by imagery than the power of the formula. What kind of imagery does she possess to wield such power?’

As she thought this while cooling the heat of the blood circulating in her body.

“During training.”

“…!”

Ena, who had quickly closed the distance, placed her hand on Elena's exposed abdomen.

“Thinking of something else is forbidden.”

[Release Lightning]

Irregular bolts of lightning shot out from Ena's grasp. In an instant, they electrocuted Elena's entire body, and the lightning that escaped from her back crawled along the ceiling, adding electric current to the walls and ceiling.

“Cough!”

A groan escaped from Elena's mouth along with blood. She gritted her teeth and struggled to manage the flowing blood, but was struck directly by another bolt of lightning and lost consciousness.

“With this, the mosquito hunt is over.”

Ena muttered as she looked down coldly at Elena, who lay on the floor. At that moment, Firenze, with wind rings around both wrists, rushed in at high speed, and starlight poured down behind him.

It was a beautiful light. Ena knew better than anyone how to tear that light apart.

Whoosh…!!

Winds gathered around Firenze. Formless winds. However, anyone sensitive to mana would recognize it as a Wind Blade. Ena bent at the waist like a noble performing a courtesy to dodge the wind blade and tilted her head slightly to the side.

It was one of her most favored body incantation methods. Instead of uttering words or forming hand seals, it activated a trigger engraved in her brain to forcibly manifest magic.

She brought forth what she desired from the formulas she remembered and made it descend into reality.

In a time when the concept of silent incantation had not yet been established, it was the engraved incantation created by a sorcerer who swept the battlefield with mere gestures, annihilating enemies.

“……Hahaha!”

Just by tilting her head, the surrounding mana writhed as if it had a will of its own. Firenze, realizing that all that mana was aiming at him with clear hostility, burst into laughter.

[Falling Lightning]

Boom!!!

The lightning that had been crawling along the ceiling condensed in one spot. It fell straight toward Firenze's head. Thanks to his reflexive burst of wind, he was able to avoid a direct hit, but just being caught in the aftermath of the falling lightning made his skin tingle as if electrocuted.

“This is the Electrification Art…!! Truly worthy of being called the best among destructive magic!”

“Didn’t you get hit by it last time?”

“At that time, it was so quick that I didn’t even have time to feel it properly. But now…”

The moment Firenze opened his mouth, the residual lightning that had been floating around his body slashed his mouth, bursting out through his nostrils. In an instant, blood began to flow from his mouth and nose, and he grinned with a bloody smile as he took his stance.

“It’s truly a delightful feeling. To duel with a sorcerer I’ve read about since childhood. Surely your disciple must be remarkable as well.”

“My disciple is indeed remarkable. But more importantly…”

Ena raised one corner of her mouth as she gazed at the now clearer starlight and the array of various magics behind Firenze.

“Have you drawn out all the time?”

“Thanks to you.”

As she spoke, flames, ice, and wind surged toward Ena in various forms. On the other side, a massive star was fiercely rotating, creating a mirage above the unconscious Celine. Ena let out a small laugh, ignoring all the other sorcerers and focusing on Celine.

“If you belong to the Aurora Magic Tower, you must have read the records about me.”

“……!”

“And yet, you’re using Stellar Rank Sorcery in front of me?”

Ena extended one hand upward, narrowing her eyes.

Crackle.

Electric currents danced between her outstretched three fingers. Immediately, they shot into the air, devouring the magic pouring in from all directions and increasing its size.

“……”

Even Asel, who had never seen such a high-level Electrification Art, was taken aback. It was likely a spell she had devised herself. He entrusted the record of the formula to Aleph, activating his mana to focus on Ena's magic.

Thunder rumbled…!!

The lightning, now as large as Celine's starlight, spun in different directions, drawing a pentagram. Lightning gathered at its center, and just as it formed a small sphere.

“Stellar Rank Sorcery exclusive interception spell.”

Ena murmured softly as she withdrew her outstretched hand.

“Construct Lightning.”

“E-Everyone cover me—”

“Radiant White Star Kill.”

Once, Ena's most favored high-level magic manifested in this world against a Stellar Rank Sorcerer she hadn’t faced in a long time.

Crack.

The lightning gem that had been floating at the center of the pentagram suddenly stopped moving, and cracks appeared on its surface. That wave alone caused Celine's mana to tremble violently.

“Ugh!”

Though it was a completely different type of formula, for some reason, a similar wave of mana resonated through the space, forcibly collapsing the Stellar Rank Sorcery.

The brilliantly shining star began to lose its light and slowly fade away. Celine gritted her teeth and tried to hold on, but the moment more cracks appeared on the lightning gem, she could no longer withstand it and collapsed.

“Ugh!”

Celine vomited bile as the nausea rose from her churning stomach. She glared at Ena with trembling pupils, clenching her fists. Ena briefly smiled at Asel before turning her expression cold as she looked back at Celine.

“Seeing that it has already collapsed with just a wave… it seems your rank isn’t very high.”

“……”

“I was somewhat looking forward to seeing a Stellar Rank Sorcerer after a long time. What a disappointment.”

With that, Ena no longer cast her gaze toward Celine.

Crackle!!

At the same time, the lightning that formed the pentagram and sphere shot out at high speed. It tore through Celine's star, scattering starlight in all directions. It was a beautiful radiance, but no one could appreciate its beauty.

Ena did not stop there; she began to unleash magic until the moment her mana allowed. As if what had just happened was a joke, and now she was truly serious.

“C-Cough!! My leg…!”

“Ughhh…!!”

The lightning pouring down without a hint of wasted space nullified all attacks and burned flesh and nerves. Only the lightning that fell near Asel circled gently around him.

The currents, wielded like blades, ground down the magic of the water sorcerer and even electrocuted the sorcerer himself. The Flame Spell lost in a contest of firepower, and the Ice Spell returned to Ena's control the moment it touched the current, attacking the sorcerer in turn.

It was a scene of merciless violence. The gap between a sorcerer who learned magic theoretically and one who experienced it on the battlefield was so vast it was hard to describe in words.

‘No matter how much mana I received, the limits are clear. This is just how amazing my master is.’

Proper mana distribution and formula output adjustment. Countering through compatibility, exploiting the weaknesses of the formula to destroy it, etc.

Even an average sorcerer would find it hard to imitate the techniques she used as if they were second nature. Asel, who activated his mana, could recognize it even more clearly.

‘If I were to duel with my master now… I might win, but it wouldn’t be easy.’

It was Ena, enhanced by overwhelming talent, time, and experience. No matter how much Asel was capable, he would not easily defeat her.

In the time it took to think, there was no one left standing in the practice room except Ena. It hadn’t been long since the training started, yet she had knocked them all down.

“……I wanted to learn theory, not combat. But this isn’t bad.”

“I feel like my eyes have opened. I think I’m starting to grasp how to manage mana.”

The professors lying on the floor murmured softly. Asel briefly glanced at them, then rose as he saw Ena waving her hand as if it was all over.

And at that moment.

Boom!!!

The firmly closed door burst open with a loud noise, shattering completely. Despite being an entrance built with considerable thickness and mana resistance typical of a sorcerer's practice room, the door crumpled and flew into the air, crashing deep into the ground.

“Hm.”

In an instant, the entrance was breached. A deep voice quietly echoed from beyond. Asel turned his head toward the owner of the voice with a stiff expression.

“I sensed a familiar smell of lightning coming from somewhere.”

The first thing that caught his eye was a black battle robe. A man wearing clothing typical of the Eastern Continent entered the practice room, his long hair tied back.

His face, clearly revealed, bore a deep scar crossing one eye. The faint wrinkles indicated that he had reached middle age.

A plain iron sword hung at his waist, clinking with each step he took. He surveyed the practice room with keen eyes, then smiled brightly as he focused on Ena.

“It's you after all.”

“……Richard Maissel.”

As if already familiar, Ena sighed deeply as she called his name. The man known as Richard chuckled, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked toward Ena.

“It’s been a while. Meeting in a private setting rather than an official one is a first, isn’t it?”

“If we’re being technical, this is still official. I’ve come in as a temporary advisor for the academy.”

“Oh? Is that really so? Hehe, how fortuitous. I never expected you, Ena, to join the academy. Then I guess that makes me your senior now? I’ve been a veteran since the academy was founded, you know.”

“Cut the nonsense.”

Ena clicked her tongue and crossed her arms.

“So? Why did you suddenly come here? Didn’t you say you were on a business trip?”

“Today happens to be my return day. I came here because I sensed familiar mana on my way back.”

“……”

“I wanted to have another match with you.”

Richard smiled as he rubbed his neck.

“Fighting you always gives me the feeling that death is imminent, and I find it enjoyable.”

“……That’s impressive. The one who gave you the title of Sword Demon.”

“It means a demon obsessed with the sword. Isn’t it a nice ring to it? It was a name given to me by my master whom I killed.”

Sword Demon. Asel's eyes widened at that title.

One of the strongest among the existing swordsmen, he was particularly obsessed with swordsmanship and combat, but his outstanding qualities as an educator led to his exile by the royal family, where he was put into the academy to nurture future generations.

Sword Demon, Richard Maissel.

He narrowed his eyes as he looked down at Ena.

“But fighting you now doesn’t seem very entertaining. Something must have happened.”

“I’m not obligated to explain.”

“Who asked? I have no interest in your personal matters. I’m just disappointed that you’ve weakened.”

He clicked his tongue and tapped the pommel of his sword with his fingers. Then he suddenly turned and began to walk back toward the entrance he had come through.

“Ah, I was just getting fired up with competitive spirit. What a shame. I was looking forward to receiving an electric massage after a long time… Hm?”

At that moment, Asel, who had been standing in the corner of the practice room, locked eyes with him. Instinctively, Asel realized that his eyes were those of a mana user.

True to being a mana user rather than a sorcerer, the energy swirling in his pupils was a vivid Aura. While it was difficult to grasp the ability of the mana itself, he could still sense its overwhelming strength.

‘Can I win?’

Asel instinctively calculated his chances against Richard. Noticing this, Richard grinned and strode toward Asel.

“Various mana colors resembling a rainbow. Among them, the power of lightning feels the strongest. Rank is roughly 7th. You haven’t been up for long, but your energy is incredibly refined. From the book you carry… how intriguing. It feels like you’re carrying a demon’s item, given that I can sense both demon and sorcerer energy at the same time.”

Asel shuddered at his almost insightful intuition. Regardless, Richard looked down at Asel with a scrutinizing gaze, nodding his head.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter.”

“Stay away from my disciple, you bastard.”

Ena interjected between the two, growling. Richard's eyes lit up with interest at the word "disciple" that slipped from Ena's mouth.

“Disciple. I heard that The Beginning took in a disciple, but this is the first time I’m seeing the real deal. Looks just like a sorcerer, doesn’t he? With such a frail body, I doubt he could even hold a pen, let alone fight. But this guy…”

Richard’s.

The face of the Sword Demon twisted with delight.

“Handled a Corpse Lord and received the title of Thunderbolt, huh?”

“……”

“How amusing. How very amusing. That’s more than enough to pique my interest.”

“Did your ears get cut off? Didn’t you hear me? Get lost—”

“Alright. I like you.”

Ignoring Ena’s words, the Sword Demon suddenly grabbed Asel by the collar and drew his sword. Then, he sliced through an entire wall of the practice room, creating a massive passageway.

Asel’s eyes widened at the wall that was cut without a sound, and Ena, unable to hold back, was about to unleash lightning at the Sword Demon when he said.

“I’ll teach you how to fight.”

The Sword Demon took a stance as if he would send Asel flying through the newly opened passage. Asel reflexively turned his head toward him, but the Sword Demon was even faster.

“You don’t need to thank me!”

“Damn—”

Boom!!

Before Asel could finish his sentence, the Sword Demon sent his body flying with a Shield. Soaring toward the sky at near-supersonic speed, Asel burst into a sonic boom as he flew toward the northern part of the academy, toward the ownerless mountain.

“A-Asel!!!!”

Ena called out Asel’s name, which had instantly become a star in the sky, with a pained expression. The Sword Demon showed her a grin as he concentrated Aura in his legs.

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill him.”

“You crazy bastard!”

Ena’s eyes glinted with killing intent as she poured all her mana toward the Sword Demon. He chuckled, not looking back, and leaped into the sky.

Soaring at a speed close to Asel’s, he shouted down at Ena, who was still on the ground, filled with Aura.

“I’ll have fun playing with your disciple!”

# 125 - Chief Professor

KWA-AAAAAAANG!!!

Asel's body, propelled by a sonic boom, crashed into the mountainside. Thanks to the Shield protecting his entire body, he was unharmed, but the immense physical force shattered the Shield into pieces.

The remnants of the Shield scattered like shards of glass. Asel grimaced and quickly restored the broken Shield.

* Kkeueeeeeek...!!

A monster's howl faintly echoed from beyond the dense thicket. It seemed excited by the sudden loud noise.

An uninhabited mountain to the north of the academy. Since it was outside the academy's jurisdiction, it was a land of monsters and plants that the academy did not manage closely.

Occasionally, students from the Magical Engineering Department or the Alchemy Department would come to gather materials, so it wasn't particularly dangerous, but the creature at the top of the food chain was a different story.

‘Was its name the Eroding Head?’

The main body was a small insect, but it had a bizarre form of a monster that attached itself to other organic or inorganic materials, multiplying and devouring the brain to control its host. The emergency treatment methods were widely known, so it wasn't difficult to deal with if you knew them, but it still had a notorious reputation among herbalists and mercenaries.

The academy provided information about them promptly, so major accidents were rare.

Of course, Asel had no problem even without that information. He could just burn the multiplying insects whole. The countermeasure was simply to wrap Mana around himself. There was no need to be surprised if a host came rushing in a swarm.

But that was that, and this was this.

It was unavoidable that the current situation was bewildering.

Out of nowhere, the Sword Demon appeared. Without any explanation, it simply tossed him into a fight, yet it hadn't even shown up itself.

Surely, it couldn't have thrown him into a battle with monsters just because he was a 7th-tier sorcerer; if it wanted to teach him how to fight, it should at least show up, but the Sword Demon was nowhere to be seen, not even a shadow.

“...Huh.”

Asel irritably raked his hair and stood up.

He didn't quite understand the meaning behind the Sword Demon's actions, but he couldn't just sit and wait for it to arrive. Asel had things to do, and he needed to attend the next class the moment Ena's class ended. He had no obligation to entertain the senile old knight.

Just as he thought that, a bolt of lightning enveloped his entire body.

“...!”

A black line was drawn vertically across the sky, crossing his line of sight. The moment it touched the ground, a massive shockwave shook the mountain.

This was not a metaphor. The earth truly trembled as if it were quaking.

A result of pure physical force.

The shattered and broken ground caused an earthquake, collapsing the habitats of the beasts and monsters living in the mountain. Asel instinctively activated a gravity formula to avoid being thrown away, but the other animals nearby were not so lucky. Asel narrowed his eyes as he watched the beasts being torn apart in real-time.

“Hmm. You've arrived well.”

As the violent winds subsided and the blood of the torn beasts dripped onto the ground, the Sword Demon's voice resonated calmly. Asel frowned as he watched the Sword Demon slowly approach with his hands behind his back.

“I have many questions, but first, let me ask this.”

“Are you asking why I brought you here? Or what my purpose is? Or perhaps... isn't it a bit rude to be so forward on our first meeting?”

“...”

Asel was left speechless, having had all his words taken away. The Sword Demon chuckled and plopped down on a rock that had not been blown away by the shockwave.

“I hear the same things every time. Now I can predict everything just by looking at your expression.”

“...Have you done this before?”

“Countless times. I tend to give 'personal training' to talented geniuses I meet. And among geniuses, there are usually many nobles.”

“...”

“Seeing the ones who were cocky at first become humble later is a kind of pleasure.”

The Sword Demon drew the sword strapped to his waist, reflecting sunlight off the blade.

“Enough of the preamble. From now on, I will teach you how to fight.”

“...I am a sorcerer. The training methods of warriors won't be much help—”

“Try it and see. Do you think I brought you far away from your master's gaze for no reason?”

“...”

Asel kept his mouth shut and stared at the Sword Demon, who was slowly rising. The Sword Demon gestured with his chin, looking down at Asel.

“Get into position and show me the strongest spell you can use. Don't worry; I won't get hurt.”

“...Wasn't this supposed to be a duel?”

“Hmm?”

The Sword Demon tilted his head at Asel's unexpected words, as if he didn't understand.

“Why would I duel with you? Didn't I say it was training?”

“...No, the context of the conversation I had with my master in the practice room was different. I thought I was going to be forced into a duel since you suddenly kidnapped me.”

“Haha, what use would it be for a warrior to defeat a sorcerer one-on-one? Should I spread the word around town?”

The Sword Demon chuckled and rested his sword on his shoulder.

“Of course, I do have duels during my regular classes. I face the top students from all grades at once. If you're also a top student, you'll probably have to attend my class forcibly, so if you want to duel, do it then. For now, as I said, it's 'training time.'”

“...Then why did you act that way in front of my master?”

“That was to annoy that Ena girl. I originally intended to ask for permission. But she insulted me first, didn't she? I can't just let that slide.”

“Looks like I was the only one who suffered.”

“Eh! Don't worry about such things, you man! Are you gay?!”

“Damn it.”

Asel couldn't hold back and cursed. The Sword Demon seemed to suggest they drop the small talk and extended a hand toward Asel, wiggling his fingers.

“Enough. Use your magic. I'll evaluate it for you.”

“Huh...”

Instead of answering, Asel glared at the Sword Demon and exhaled deeply.

‘The Sword Demon’s behavior is indeed strange, but the current situation is an opportunity in itself.’

The Sword Demon was one of the strongest swordsmen on the continent. He was also renowned for his excellence as an educator, and his Aura manipulation ability was a step above other high-ranking swordsmen. While he might be outmatched in swordsmanship or Imagery, when it came to the power of handling sword energy, there was no one on the continent who could rival him.

If he could gain knowledge from such a person, he could overlook this level of discomfort with a smile.

‘I don't know what abilities a sorcerer can learn from a swordsman, though.’

In any field, there are always things to learn from those who have reached the pinnacle. Asel calmly adjusted the surging Mana and revealed the formula outward.

“Oh.”

Dozens of magic circles began to rise around Asel, orbiting around him. The spell was filled with all sorts of geometric patterns. The magic that Asel had devised and revised took on a completely different form from existing spells, absorbing Mana abundantly.

“Have you already reached the level of directly creating magic? Impressive at such a young age. Your Mana is also changing into properties suitable for each system.”

“...Can you see that?”

Asel was sensitive to Mana, so he could visualize it, but warriors could not. Unlike Aura, which is openly displayed, Mana is a power operated internally, making it difficult even for other sorcerers to see Mana with their eyes.

Yet the Sword Demon spoke as if he could see Mana directly.

Asel found it strange that he would say such a thing.

“It’s the power of my eye.”

And Asel's guess was spot on.

“The fundamental structure made of Mana can be seen with the eyes. This includes Aura, Mana, Sorcery Power, and so on.”

“...”

“However, if used for too long, it overloads the brain and deteriorates vision. So I’m adjusting it appropriately.”

“Is it really okay for you to tell me that so casually?”

The high-level Electrification Art was now complete. The dozens of spells overlapped, forming a high-level magic that Asel had devised, precisely targeting the Sword Demon’s forehead as it powered up.

“That’s quite a weakness.”

“A weakness?”

The Sword Demon snorted and thrust the blade forward.

“A weakness is a weakness when hidden. If you reveal it openly, you can gain an advantage in psychological warfare.”

“...”

“Of course, this is also thanks to the fact that the penalty I have is relatively mild, but so what? This is still my power.”

“...”

“Likewise, the abilities and talents given to you by nature are undeniably yours. How you utilize them is entirely up to you. In battle, situational judgment can dictate everything. There are many cases where a moment's hesitation can lead to losing your head. So if you've decided how to use your power, don't hesitate. This is my first lesson. It's something everyone knows, yet many who don't hear it fail to realize it. Most talented geniuses are like that.”

Kiiiiiing...!!

The sword held by the Sword Demon burst into a golden light.

“Anyway.”

He smiled as he looked at the spectacle of lightning filling the sky.

“That's some incredible power. The Mana is so abundant that it distorts my vision. If I were sensitive to Mana, I might have fainted right here.”

“Is that so?”

“Seems like you've heard that compliment a lot. You don't even look surprised.”

The Sword Demon laughed heartily and aimed his sword at the sky.

“Come, future great sorcerer.”

“...”

“Prove it here, the title of the Sky of Lightning.”

Instead of answering, Asel smiled coldly and snapped his fingers.

At that moment, the lightning that had been rotating in the sky refracted into three branches, forming a massive ring.

[Upper Sky Thunder Wheel]

KWA-AAAAAAAH...!!

The created ring spun violently, scattering lightning in all directions. The terrifying intent to kill of the dark blue lightning descended with the intent to obliterate all living beings on the ground.

A bizarre space illuminated not by the sun but by lightning. A large-scale high-level magic that Asel had devised and created to produce effects similar to extreme magic.

Normally, it would resonate with the caster's Mana, gradually increasing in size and power, but through Asel's Mana manipulation, the extensive army magic was maximized and unleashed from the start, precisely aimed at the Sword Demon.

“Good.”

The Sword Demon grinned as he watched the scene.

“Good!”

Swish!

With that, the Sword Demon sliced through the lightning.

# 126 - The Yearning Book

Kaga Kaga Kaka!!

Every time the Sword Demon’s sword moved, lightning split the sky and struck the ground. The sight of it effortlessly cutting through the powerful Electrification Art, one of the highest tiers of destructive magic, was truly overwhelming.

‘…Was it possible to cut magic that isn’t elemental?’

Elemental formulas that manipulate fire, water, and ice can be cut by warriors who can output greater power than mages, as the basic sources are tangible materials that can be touched.

However, magic that deals with phenomena like radiance, holiness, electrification, black light, and shadow—these are all forms of magic that lack a physical form and cannot be cut through conventional means. While it is possible to suppress them with the same magic, cutting them with a sword is practically impossible.

Yet the Sword Demon was cutting through lightning, which existed solely as light and energy, as easily as breathing. Although a massive amount of Aura was layered onto the blade, it seemed insufficient to explain the phenomenon.

“Hahaha!”

Swaaaack—!!

The sword energy flew toward the ring of lightning in the sky.

The perfectly bisected ring wobbled unsteadily before emitting an even more intense glow, sending dozens of lightning strikes crashing down to the ground. The Sword Demon sliced through them with a smile.

A skill bordering on the divine. Asel tilted his head as he watched the lightning split and pierce the ground beside the Sword Demon.

‘It’s not cutting the magic itself.’

He thought as he observed the severed magic and the Sword Demon’s meticulous Aura manipulation.

‘If anything, it’s closer to dissecting Mana.’

To activate magic, one must construct a formula and form the spell according to that formula. And inevitably, this entire process consumes Mana. The Sword Demon was visualizing the Mana being used in this way, directly tearing apart and grinding its flow, effectively disassembling the magic itself.

“…”

While it was easier than directly cutting magic, it was still absurd. Asel let out a hollow laugh and absorbed the remnants of the shattered Mana, nullifying the backlash of the formula destruction.

“Phew!”

Before long, the lightning disappeared, and tranquility returned.

The Sword Demon cheerfully laughed as he shook off his sword. The lightning that had clung to the blade exploded outward like a bomb, wreaking havoc in all directions.

“Is this the extent of what remains of the Mana? Quite the obsession.”

“How about it? Do you have an estimate?”

“…You don’t even feel the backlash? This is pure monstrosity. When facing mages, I usually let them feel a wall at least once.”

The Sword Demon grinned and sheathed his sword.

“I felt it from the first time I saw you; you’re definitely not an ordinary one. If you were born in the age of war, you would have secured a position for yourself. Well, you might have died before that, though.”

“…”

“Anyway, I’m satisfied.”

Richard muttered as he gazed at the devastated mountain.

“It’s already complete. I don’t think there’s much to teach; at most, I could just share some theory. Or it might not be a bad idea to throw you into the field to hone your senses.”

“…”

“Do you have any plans for this vacation?”

Richard approached Asel and asked. Asel nodded and gathered all the scattered Mana around him.

“I’m thinking of going to the steep cliffs in the Bishof Kingdom.”

“Oh, you mean the place where lightning strikes all day long in the summer? That’s not a bad choice. Do you have any plans after that?”

“Not particularly.”

The currents of electricity lingering in the air all converged near Asel. He infused the rising lightning into his Mana Core and turned to Richard. Richard, grinning, patted Asel on the shoulder.

“Then let’s go to Valdemia together this vacation.”

“…Valdemia? The Vampire Principality?”

“Yeah.”

Richard nodded.

“Vampires are fundamentally strong. Their long lifespans contribute to that, but the unique environment of the principality plays an even bigger role.”

“…Hmm.”

“Dead creatures in that place don’t just disperse; they turn into blood mist and wander the principality, resurrecting whenever the opportunity arises. Because of that, the vampires living alongside them can’t help but be strong.”

Asel involuntarily thought of Elena and sighed softly.

“Well, the gist is this: during this vacation, stop by the principality, do some camping and hunting, and while you’re at it, gain experience by hunting ancient species. Among them are creatures that are natural enemies to mages, so you’ll be able to grow significantly.”

“…I’ll think about it.”

“Do that. After all, there are still a few weeks left. Keep pondering while attending the top participant classes.”

With that, Richard gave Asel a strong pat on the back. Dozens of Shields shattered, scattering like fragments. Asel looked at Richard with a bewildered expression and let out a hollow laugh.

However, Richard paid him no mind and turned his body toward the academy.

“Well then, I’ll be off. I’m sorry for bringing you here to educate you without teaching you much, but I’ll make sure to inform you during class later.”

“…”

“See you then. Lightning.”

As he uttered those words, Richard leaped in the direction of the academy. Asel watched his rapidly disappearing figure and forced a smile.

[He’s a peculiar person, but he doesn’t seem bad.]

Aleph whispered from within Asel’s embrace, and Asel sat down on the ground, letting out a small laugh.

It had been a sudden encounter with a rather unfavorable first impression, but looking back, it didn’t seem so bad.

[Master.]

The sun was still shining brightly, and the sunlight was hot. Thick clouds occasionally cast shadows on the ground, but that alone was insufficient to erase the heat. It was still early summer, yet the days were already this warm.

[Are you really going today?]

Conversely, the nights remained chilly. As midnight approached, people tended to disappear from the streets, and the vibrancy of the day faded away like a lie, leaving only silence to fill the space.

It was the perfect moment for discreet movement. Asel nodded, feeling the power of black magic hidden deep within his Mana Core.

“I can’t delay any longer.”

* When are you planning to return, Gorsel? If you’ve failed your mission, you should return boldly and accept your punishment. Do you think hiding in the academy will keep you safe?

Upon returning to the dormitory, Gorsel found a crow and a letter lying on the table. He immediately contorted his face and tore the crow in half, killing it.

The blood and organs spilled out, and the letter soaked in blood melted away beneath the fallen corpse. Gorsel irritably brushed his hair back and plopped down onto his bed.

“Who wants to stay in this damn place?”

According to the original plan, Gorsel should have returned to his hideout the moment the joint training ended to carry out the ritual. But everything had gone awry because of the masked dark sorcerer’s sudden intervention.

Had he not intervened, Gorsel wouldn’t have remained in the academy. He would have likely kidnapped the students as planned and offered them as sacrifices. Then he wouldn’t have to tremble in anxiety here, nor would he have to worry about when the dark sorcerer might come.

“Damn it. Fucking damn it!”

Gorsel, who had taken to cursing since some time ago, pulled at his hair in frustration.

Seeing that the sorcerer had sent the crow and letter with a spell, it was clear that time was running out. Probably at most a week. If it went beyond that, they would send someone to assassinate him. Or offer him as a sacrifice.

“…”

He didn’t betray his kin for such an ending. He burned his homeland and sacrificed his kin to become a higher race, superior to the primitive druids, to dominate them. He had never imagined such a miserable conclusion.

In the end, to change the outcome, he had to return to the hideout on his own feet with appropriate results.

And the existence of the dark sorcerer was essential to all of this. As long as he didn’t appear, Gorsel was as good as dead.

‘Where the hell are you, you fucking demon spawn?’

Gorsel gritted his teeth at the memory of the masked dark sorcerer he had last seen.

And at that moment.

Zzzzzzzzz……!!

“…!”

One of the windows in Gorsel’s dormitory room began to be enveloped in darkness. The phenomenon was as if someone was forcibly opening space with their hands, causing Gorsel to swallow hard and spring to his feet.

At the same time, a man wearing a mask walked through the darkness that had opened up. He clicked his tongue upon seeing the blood-soaked table and the crow’s corpse, then fell silent for a moment as he turned to Gorsel.

“You, you fucking bastard!”

Despite the sudden appearance of the dark sorcerer, Gorsel didn’t panic; instead, he approached him in anger. He grabbed the dark robe tightly and glared at him.

“Where the hell have you been all this time, and why are you only showing up now—”

“Clean this up.”

The dark sorcerer grabbed Gorsel’s arm and spoke in a flat voice.

“Or do you need to lose your limbs again to come to your senses?”

“…!”

Faced with the unpleasant and menacing voice, Gorsel immediately released his grip and took a step back.

“You… you’ve gotten stronger since then.”

“…”

“What the hell have you been doing?”

The dark sorcerer didn’t answer Gorsel’s question and plopped down into an empty chair, staring out the window.

The bright moon was softly illuminating the ground beyond the transparent window. Some of that light spilled through the window, reflecting the dark sorcerer’s figure.

“…”

The magic he used to travel here wasn’t space-jumping magic. It was merely an advanced shadow magic that could only be used at this time of day, stretched to its limits, allowing him to move quickly through shadows and darkness. The act of tearing space apart was just for show.

Fortunately, it seemed that the performance had worked well. Asel couldn’t help but laugh inwardly as he watched Gorsel, who had crawled into a corner, trembling in fear.

[The training has gone well. You look good.]

‘Indeed.’

After a brief exchange with Aleph, Asel tilted his head and spoke.

“I have no reason to accommodate your circumstances, nor do I wish to. Naturally, I have no obligation to answer your questions either.”

“…”

“If you understand, shut up and prepare to guide me. The preparations for the ritual are complete.”

“I feel like I should know what you’ve brought with you.”

Gorsel said with difficulty.

“It would be a huge problem if you brought something useless as a sacrifice. If you mess up, there’s a risk of the ritual collapsing altogether.”

“…”

Asel pondered for a moment at Gorsel’s words, then pulled out two blood packs filled with blood from his robe. Gorsel narrowed his eyes at the sight of the bright red blood packs spinning in the air.

“…Blood?”

“It’s the blood of a mage who reached the 7th tier during the joint training.”

It was Asel’s blood.

“Originally, I planned to ambush him quickly after the training ended and take him away, but as you know, the Corpse Lord’s intervention changed the situation. It became impossible to even ambush him, let alone kidnap him.”

“…”

Gorsel recalled the moment when Zervil was taking Asel away during the joint training and let out a low sound.

Asel continued speaking.

“Anyway, to secure him somehow, I managed to reach the location where Zervil and Asel, the two mages, were fighting, but the battle had already ended. All I found was a bloodied Asel.”

“…Why didn’t you kidnap him then?”

“Because priests were arriving at a similar speed to mine. No matter how fast I am, it’s impossible to face multiple priests while moving quickly. Especially not while carrying a burden. Killing a priest is also a difficult task. If I don’t want to be trapped forever on the academy grounds, killing them in a city like this is tantamount to suicide.”

The moment a priest is killed in a place with a cathedral, the sacred laws embedded in the cathedral activate, sanctifying the entire area. Then, except for the priests who can operate holy power, no one can enter or exit the area.

Asel was explaining this fact.

“So, I had no choice but to quickly extract the blood and leave. Fortunately, that guy’s blood turned out to be quite valuable.”

Asel infused Mana into the blood pack containing his blood.

Wooooom…!

At the same time, a powerful Mana response erupted from the blood within the pack. This meant that the blood itself contained a special power.

Gorsel’s eyes lit up with interest.

“…Is the blood a kind of elixir?”

“Not quite. But it’s clear that high-purity Mana has seeped into the blood. With just this one blood pack, it wouldn’t be impossible to substitute for dozens of mages.”

“…Interesting. I’d like to take a sip.”

At Gorsel’s words, Asel frowned and put the blood pack back into his robe.

“Get lost. Now shut up and prepare to guide me. I think I’ve given you enough time.”

Author's Note (Author's Afterword)

Thank you, Jiogeon! I will strive harder with your support!

# 127 - The Yearning Book

"The temporary hideout is near the Academy."

Gorsel spoke from the highest spire within the Academy grounds, a location overlooking the entire area.

"Even if we don't go to a conflict zone, it should be sufficient to perform the ritual there."

"Quite bold. Aren't you worried about being caught?"

"It doesn't matter much if we are. If we were to kidnap Academy students and take them to our main base, it would take at least a few weeks. And if pursuers were to follow, it would be quite troublesome."

"......"

"So, to quickly perform the ritual and escape, we created a hideout near the Academy. We didn't put much effort into it, so it's not a big deal if it's discovered and destroyed."

"The location?"

"Just keep heading south."

Asel clicked his tongue at Gorsel's answer.

"What am I supposed to do with such a vague explanation?"

"......Is there a problem? If you're going with me anyway, I can guide you. There's no need to get angry."

"Time is short."

Asel said, glancing towards the dormitory.

'I need to return before my master and sister notice anything strange.'

It was late at night. The people in the same room were already asleep, but the possibility of them waking up couldn't be ruled out. If they woke up and noticed Asel was gone, it would be quite a nuisance.

He wanted to avoid such a situation if possible. Since he wasn't doing anything honorable, it was best to avoid the aftermath of being caught altogether.

So, he had to return before they woke up, at least before morning.

"We'll finish everything tonight. I need to be back here before morning, so we need to shorten the journey somehow."

"......It's a three-hour walk even if you run. No matter how fast we go, it'll be morning by the time we get back."

"I'll take care of that, so just tell me the exact location. Or just tell me how many meters south I need to go. It would be easier if you could mark it on a map."

"......I'll mark it on a map. I don't know why you're in such a hurry, but I have nothing to lose if the ritual is faster."

Gorsel said, taking out a small map from his pocket and drawing a circle with blood he squeezed from his fingertip. Asel took the map and estimated the distance from his current location to the hideout.

'It's a long distance to walk, but objectively, it's close. There shouldn't be any problems with transportation.'

More surprising was that the hideout was closer to the Academy than he had thought. Of course, the Academy couldn't provide security outside its grounds. The territory permitted to the Academy was the grounds themselves, so interfering beyond the bridgehead managed by other lords was virtually impossible.

Perhaps the demon worshippers had exploited this vulnerability to create the hideout.

A place where the probability of being caught was infinitely low, even if they didn't care about being caught.

The saying "the darkest place is under the candlestick" wasn't for nothing. Asel shook his head inwardly and shifted his gaze in the direction indicated on the map.

"Step back."

The voice heard from behind the mask echoed. As soon as Gorsel confirmed that Asel's Mana was fluctuating, he retreated as ordered.

Thud.

Beneath Asel's feet. Darkness, where even moonlight couldn't penetrate, began to writhe as if it were a wave. At the same time, the darkness and shadows covering the entire Academy grounds stirred.

It was a noisy sight, but there was no sound. Thanks to the perception-hindering Formula applied to the entire magic, no one noticed. Someone with an extremely sensitive constitution to Mana might notice, but there was no one that sensitive in the Academy right now.

'It might be different if my master hadn't lost her rank.'

The current Ena could never notice if Asel secretly mobilized his Mana with all his might. So, he didn't have to worry about anyone hearing about his use of magic.

"This is......!"

Gorsel, who was standing behind Asel, was agitated as he watched the fluctuating darkness. It wasn't Black Magic, but an obscure Shadow Sorcery that mixed its principles. A rare magic where the concepts of darkness and shadow themselves were ambiguous, danced gracefully on Asel's hand.

"Was the magic you used back then Shadow Sorcery, not Black Magic?"

The "back then" Gorsel was talking about was probably the minor conflict at the bar.

Asel nonchalantly replied while manipulating the magic.

"No, it's Black Magic. It's just that the Black Magic I've learned has good compatibility with Shadow Sorcery."

The Black Magic Asel used was basically derived from the Black Magic grimoire he obtained at the auction and the Formula of the Black Magic Sorcerer he had directly captured and killed.

The grimoire was filled with the overall mechanics of the Black Magic Sorcerer and the basic magic that served as the foundation, so even Asel, who lacked Imagery, was able to use it based on his vast Mana.

The Sorcery he was using now was an improved version that Asel had dismantled, analyzed, and modified on his own, based on the Shadow Sorcery-based Black Magic that the Black Magic Sorcerer had handled. He had completely eliminated the useless parts and filled those spaces with efficiency and power, far surpassing the Black Magic Sorcerer's magic in combat and all other aspects.

Asel's original magic, infused with plenty of Black Magic Mana and with the origin of the Formula rooted in Shadow Sorcery.

Thanks to that, it was also possible to pioneer the way in this manner.

[Ink Silk Mystic Road]

Creak......!!

The fluctuating darkness condensed into a thin line. The line swayed without any force, then suddenly flew somewhere and became taut. Asel nodded, confirming that the magic had manifested normally.

Two strands of black silk came to Asel's front. Asel gently grasped one of them and turned to Gorsel.

"Grab one."

"......Is it safe?"

"If you don't trust me, run here yourself. I don't care."

At Asel's annoyed reply, Gorsel hesitantly grabbed the silk. As soon as he confirmed, Asel stared straight ahead and spat out.

"If you let go in the middle, you'll die."

"What...... Ugh?!"

Whoosh!!!

Before Gorsel could finish speaking, the silk expanded, dyeing the two people's bodies with darkness, and sent them flying at high speed towards the end of the silk.

A sensation as if they had become one with the darkness. A high-speed movement magic that slid through space using the silk as a medium.

Riding on the silk. Asel, who had instantly cut through the sky above the Academy, looked down and smiled inside his mask.

It was always a good feeling to face the wind while moving quickly.

[It's slower than riding lightning, but this is not bad either.]

Aleph, sensing Asel's mood, muttered so. Asel burst into a chuckle.

'There are many other movement techniques, but this one has good Mana efficiency and feels good. Although there is a risk of dying if you let go in the middle......'

[That's not applicable to Master, is it?]

'That's right.'

Asel replied, glancing at Gorsel, who was gritting his teeth to avoid letting go of the silk.

Whoosh......!!

Not long after cutting through the wind, they arrived at the hideout.

Whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, Gorsel did not let go of the silk until he reached his destination. However, the motion sickness was unavoidable, and he grabbed a nearby rock and vomited. Asel didn't pay attention to him and collected all the aftereffects of the magic he had used to get here.

Then, he stepped straight into the cave from which a strange aura emanated. Gorsel, who had recovered, stuck close behind him.

"Say something before you go in......"

"It's obviously here, so what's the point of saying anything? I set the destination itself as the hideout in the first place, so there's no way I could be mistaken."

"......You're so great. Are all Black Magic Sorcerers as rude as you?"

"Say one more word. I'll cut out your tongue, slice it up, and swap the positions of your fingers."

"......"

Gorsel shut his mouth at Asel's chilling declaration. Thanks to that, Asel was able to enter the cave comfortably.

Not long after walking, a staircase appeared. It wasn't a deep staircase. Asel stared at the torch hanging on the wall for a moment before shifting his gaze to the door at the end of the staircase and moving his feet.

Each time he went down a step, the torches hanging on the wall were lit one by one.

Purple flames, not red ones, bloomed above the torches. The moment Asel realized that the identity of the flames was the result of Sorcery.

Creak.

The door at the end of the staircase opened on its own, and a man walked out from beyond it. He looked at the two people with a smiling expression and opened his mouth.

"You're much later than expected. I was wondering if I should go looking for you."

"......"

"Well, it's a relief that you came late. I won't have to get my hands dirty for nothing."

The Sorcerer said, shifting his gaze towards Asel.

"You're the collaborator for this job, right? It's my first time seeing you in person. I heard that you maintained a sense of mystery even in the organization you originally belonged to."

"......So?"

"Ah, it's nothing. I was just wondering if you're going to keep wearing the mask even when you're collaborating with us."

Instead of answering the Sorcerer's words immediately, Asel examined his capabilities.

[A 7th-Circle Sorcerer created through human sacrifice. There are many parts that deviate from the Circle. However, since Sorcery itself is a power that goes well with human sacrifice, it will be difficult to kill him carelessly.]

It was as Aleph said. Asel also noticed that the Sorcerer's Circle was unstable. That was probably the evidence of human sacrifice.

However, unlike magic, Sorcery has a close relationship with human sacrifice, so no matter how much human sacrifice a Sorcerer performs, they don't go crazy or have their personality twisted like a magician. It only creates a slight crack in the Sorcery.

[Master could probably kill him quickly. But I don't recommend it. In the case of Sorcerers who have become stronger through human sacrifice, they are notorious for taking the person who killed them with them at the moment of death, using themselves as a sacrifice. I don't want to lose Master in a place like this.]

'I don't intend to die either.'

[That's a relief. Killing him should be done after analyzing his Sorcery first.]

'Can you analyze it?'

[I'm already doing it. From the moment he foolishly showed off his power with the torch, it's impossible to escape from my wisdom.]

'I'm trusting you.'

[Leave it to me. More than that, Master, I've detected the aura of someone who feels like a vessel for a demon inside. Judging from the fact that they're unconscious, it seems that only the body has been created. The mind is empty. Would you like to check it out?]

'Okay. I'll go find it as soon as I get the chance.'

[Understood. Then I will focus on the analysis.]

Aleph fell silent after saying those words. Asel tapped her, who was in his arms, with his finger for no reason and answered the Sorcerer's question.

"I will never take off my mask. Likewise, I will never tell you my name."

"That's unfortunate. But can't you at least tell me a pseudonym? It's difficult to keep calling you Black Magic Sorcerer, Black Magic Sorcerer."

A pseudonym. After thinking for a moment, Asel spat out any name that came to mind.

"Call me Ian."

"Ian. That's a good name. You didn't tell me your real name as if it were a pseudonym, did you?"

"......"

"I'm just kidding. Ah, my name is Dunken. Of course, I'm also using a pseudonym."

Dunken said, stepping aside towards the open door.

"Now, let's go inside. We can't delay the ritual any longer."

"......Okay."

Asel answered casually and walked towards the open door.

"Gorsel."

At that moment, Dunken called Gorsel's name from behind.

"I want to talk to you later. There are many things I want to hear."

"......Hoo. I will."

"Good."

From Gorsel's obedient attitude, Asel realized that Dunken was higher in rank than Gorsel.

"Oh, you've come."

"......You're late."

As soon as he entered through the door, a woman sitting on a chair and an elderly man came into view. They, who had been wearing sullen expressions, got up from their seats as they saw Asel and Gorsel entering.

"Why are you so late? I thought my neck would break from waiting! Don't you think it's too much to not come until we raid the nearby village and boil everyone alive?"

"Now, now, Dellim. Don't be like that. Gorsel must have had his reasons. Girzen is staying still too."

"I'm tired of ordinary human flesh! It's about time we caught and ate some Mana users! How long do we have to wait here?"

"I was thinking of starting the ritual right away anyway. Let's go right now."

Dunken said, turning to Asel and Gorsel.

"As you can see, our cute Dellim seems to be in a hurry. I don't want to treat you in many ways, but I think we should go straight into the ritual. Is that okay?"

"I don't care."

Asel replied, taking out two blood packs.

"Rather, I want to finish it quickly too."

"......Hoo, that's not ordinary blood, is it? Is that why you're so confident even though you didn't bring a corpse or a sacrifice? Where did you get it?"

"I have no obligation to tell you."

Dunken smiled bitterly at Asel's cold reply, and the Blood Magic Sorcerer Girzen growled.

"You're being quite uncooperative. Should we sort out the hierarchy here before we go?"

"Hierarchy?"

Asel scoffed and turned to Girzen.

"If you want, anytime."

Thud......!!

Asel unleashed a portion of his Mana and revealed his murderous intent. That alone caused the space to vibrate, and everyone's five senses here became sharp. Girzen, who had attempted the provocation first, widened his eyes, and Dellim tore her pupils vertically and revealed her teeth.

"Stop."

At that moment, Dunken turned to Dellim and Girzen and spat out.

"Stay still if you don't want to die. What kind of attitude is that towards a guest, you two."

"......Hoo."

"It's a situation where every inch is urgent. Don't cause trouble for no reason and stay still."

"......I understand."

Girzen sighed deeply and replied at Dunken's words. Asel scoffed as he watched the scene.

"It was just a leashed dog barking. Is it impossible to tear someone apart without the master's command?"

Girzen's forehead creased for a moment at Asel's blatant criticism, but perhaps because of Dunken's gaze, he lowered his head instead of rushing in and moved towards the ritual chamber first.

"Let's go too."

Dunken, Dellim, and Gorsel also moved following Girzen. Asel floated the two blood packs with telekinetic magic and followed them.

After walking for about 10 minutes, a strong smell of blood wafted from inside the cave. Asel frowned at the smell, as if blood extracted from hundreds of corpses had remained stagnant without rotting or drying.

"We've arrived."

Dunken said, stepping into a huge hollow with Sorcery drawn on it. Asel tilted his head as he looked at a girl standing on the Sorcery beyond him.

"......"

There was no life in her eyes. Her naked body, with no clothes on, was beautiful, but her expression was like a corpse, giving off an atmosphere as if she had been embalmed alive.

Blue eyes and blue hair were impressive, but the girl felt closer to a work of art than a human.

Just as Asel was gazing at her with interest.

[Master.]

"Ian."

Aleph and Dunken spoke at the same time.

[That is the vessel of the demon.]

"That person will be our savior."

# 128 - The Yearning Book (3)

A vessel for a demon, was it?

“……”

Asel fundamentally didn't know much about the existence of demons.

Fallen transcendents. Failures who were defeated in the battle against God and chose to corrupt instead of being annihilated. He knew they were a kind of Outer God with tremendous power, but he didn't have any more knowledge than that.

Aleph, too, had forgotten all knowledge about demons after his connection with the Demon of Knowledge was severed.

In the end, the only way to get information about demons was to go out and search for it himself.

This was the first step. The reason Asel was reluctantly pretending to be a demon worshiper was all to get information about the Demon of Possibility. If he took it one step at a time like this, he would eventually reach him someday.

Asel narrowed his eyes as he followed Dunken toward the girl.

Asel's first impression of the girl was no different from reality.

A gaze staring blankly into the void.

Bloodshot eyes and flowing bloody tears, because she didn't blink, were not characteristics that a conscious person could have. Her body, unclothed, was beautiful, but her skin was so pale that it was better to think of her as a taxidermied product with all her organs removed.

“……”

The girl showed no reaction even when Asel approached right in front of her. She still stared at the void with an empty gaze.

[The body's nutritional balance is shattered. Although it is a vessel for a demon, the components needed for survival seem to be no different from those of humans. However, since the vessel is what it is, it seems that it will not die no matter how hungry or thirsty it is.]

Aleph, who was sharing Asel's gaze, whispered.

[This girl is an existence reconstructed from a combination of numerous human bodies. In a way, she is no different from a newborn. Since rituals related to demons were used in the process of creating the body, her lifespan is much longer than that of ordinary people, and her lifeline is expected to be considerable.]

'Were there beings like this before?'

[Occasionally. Vessels to contain demons. Most of them were discovered and disposed of in advance. I've watched Cromwell electrocute them a few times.]

"Ian."

In the middle of his conversation with Aleph, Dunken turned around and spoke to Asel.

"Do you happen to know who the demon we serve is?"

An unexpected question. Asel glanced at the girl instead of answering.

It was better to remain silent than to squeeze his brain and come up with an answer in a state of ignorance.

Dunken would have relentlessly pressed him if he had to, but fortunately, he didn't seem to have any intention of hearing Asel's answer, as he smiled and continued.

"We serve the Demon of the Deep Sea."

"……Demon of the Deep Sea."

"Yes. He is famous for having a very beautiful appearance. So, we crafted a very beautiful vessel for him. Ah, it took at least hundreds of thousands of humans just to make this."

"……Hundreds of thousands?"

Asel frowned and asked back at the much larger number than he had expected. Dunken smiled gleefully and placed his hand on the girl's shoulder.

"A lot, right? It was a bit of a struggle, thanks to that. We went to slums, conflict zones, battlefields, neutral zones, and so on. We went to every place where we could capture people. It was a difficult task, but when I think about it being for our savior, I get a lot of strength."

"……."

"Anyway. That's not the important thing."

Dunken wiped the bloody tears flowing down the girl's cheeks with a handkerchief and continued.

"The Demon of the Deep Sea, our savior, will cover this world with the deep sea and purify the world once. After that purification, the surviving 'New Humans' will write a new mythology again."

"……Huh."

"Doesn't it make you excited just to hear it? We will be witnesses to the purification ceremony! We will become prophets of the New Humans and lead a new world!"

"……Aren't you guys going to be purified?"

"Haha."

As if asking what kind of question that was, Dunken laughed cheerfully and tilted his head.

"We are the apostles of the savior. How can an apostle be purified? We are noble in ourselves."

[He's a madman. Historically, demon worshipers have always been like that.]

Aleph muttered at Dunken's words. Asel also agreed with her.

Asel had only had one experience of directly encountering a demon worshiper. Even then, he quickly dealt with them and took their identity without even hearing their ideology.

So, this was the first time he had heard the thoughts and ideologies of demon worshipers.

'They think of themselves as saviors and prophets who will heal the world.'

[The guys who worship the Demon of Benevolence tried to kill all the humans in this world and return the world to its original form. Except for themselves, of course.]

'…….'

[Demon worshipers are all like that. They put demons forward as saviors and tried to purify the world as redeemers.]

'Was the Demon of Knowledge, your original master, like that too?'

[Yes. My memories are hazy, but as far as I can vaguely recall, he tried to extract the brains of all mankind and plant a tree that would use them as fruit. Then, he was going to create mankind himself, and that mankind would continue to consume brains and preserve all knowledge for an eternity.]

'Crazy.'

Asel clicked his tongue at the demons' 'salvation.'

Was it because he was originally a transcendent? The idea itself was extremely abnormal. In the end, wasn't it a plan to destroy the world under the guise of purification?

'……Is the Demon of Possibility similar?'

It was an issue he couldn't be sure of yet. Asel suppressed his distracting thoughts for now and approached Dunken, who was already preparing for the ritual, and said.

"Is the Demon of the Deep Sea currently dead?"

"Huh? No? He's just not in the present world, but he's still alive. Maybe he's swimming in the sea of hell?"

"Hmm."

"More than that, Ian, which demon do you serve? Everyone in your group is so free-spirited that the demons they serve are all different, right? I'm very curious to know which demon a mysterious person like you serves."

It was a sudden question, but it wasn't a question he couldn't answer. After a moment of contemplation, Asel came up with a suitable answer.

"The Demon of Possibility."

"Ah, Possibility, you say? You certainly serve a demon that suits you. There isn't much known information about him either, is there?"

"Do you know anything about the Demon of Possibility?"

"I only know one thing. Thanks to him, we can increase our level by killing a large number of people, right?"

"……."

"I don't know much about other information because there isn't much known. Maybe you're going to tell me, Ian?"

"No."

Asel turned around and said.

"I don't particularly intend to tell you."

"I guess not. Both you and him stick to mysticism, don't you? I didn't expect it."

"……."

"More than that, the preparations for the ritual are all finished. Would you like to start pouring the blood in the blood pack onto the vessel?"

"……I will."

Asel muttered quietly and moved toward the girl.

A demon summoning ritual. A task that no sane person should ever attempt. He was going to perform it with his own hands, but Asel's actions were without hesitation.

Because he knew.

'In the end, it's my blood that's being used in the ritual. I can change my blood into normal blood at any time if I want to. Besides…….'

Asel subtly tapped the location where Aleph was with his finger and thought.

'Aleph.'

[Yes. I can twist the demon summoning ritual enough with my power. I've already seen the ritual hundreds of times, and I've seen it break thousands of times. This is easy.]

'I trust you.'

[Trust me.]

Asel burst into laughter inwardly at the confident voice. He felt four pairs of eyes staring at him and grabbed the blood pack without hesitation and burst it open.

Pudeudeuk!!

The compressed blood pack couldn't withstand the force and broke. The bloody water that fell right on top of the girl's head drenched her entire body and flowed down like a waterfall.

"Girzen."

At the same time, Girzen used Mana to permeate the flowing blood throughout the spell. Originally, he had to grind and drink the corpses one by one to fill the spell with blood, flesh, and souls, but the bloody water containing Asel's Mana skipped all those processes and forcibly executed the ritual.

Ugh...!

The spell started, and a resonance was created in the space itself. It was a sound like a giant whale crying. Asel leaned against the wall and examined the entire ritual.

"What we desire is purification. The flow of pure water. What we offer is the soul. And the Blood Sea."

Dunken controlled the entire spell and muttered quietly. Dellim tore off the heads of the corpses gathered in the corner and ate them, and Gorsel stabilized the energy of the earth. Girzen controlled the flow of blood and smoothly connected the spell.

It felt as if the space itself was distorted. It was as if he had stepped into a strange place where his five senses were dulled, and only his mind was clearly felt.

"……!"

At the same time as he recognized it, his breath was cut off as if he had fallen into water. A terrible sensation swept through his entire body, as if his body was slowly rising into the air as if floating on buoyancy, and water was flowing madly into his eyes, nose, and mouth.

When he came to his senses, Asel had already been thrown into the middle of the sea.

-Kkiiiiiiik…….

In the muffled hearing, he heard the whale's cry, which was strangely clear. Asel reflexively turned his head toward the sound.

That's how their eyes met.

"……."

Beneath Asel's feet. In the darkness as if looking down into the deep sea, a giant whale was staring straight at him.

Its size was beyond comprehension. Although the distance was quite far, its shining eyes were so large that they could crush an entire island. The vertically split mouth reeked of blood and rotten organs, and the tail formed by countless deep-sea creatures clinging to it was full of murderous intent and malice.

Just looking at it seemed to make his mind faint.

The senses of his entire body were going crazy. It was as if his brain was burning in a festival of senses, as if he was staring with his nose, drinking with his ears, and listening with his eyes.

A creature before an irresistible being. A monster that was not even allowed to recognize.

A fallen one.

A transcendent.

A demon.

Our great savior

[Master!]

"……!"

At the voice calling him, Asel's eyes, which had been momentarily dazed, returned to clarity. At the same time as he regained his senses, he bit his tongue slightly and made a wound. The bitter taste of blood brought Asel back to reality.

'Aleph!'

He urgently called Aleph's name. Aleph realized his will and answered immediately.

[I'm canceling it!]

'Faster!'

[This is the maximum speed! 5 seconds left!]

'Damn it……!'

5 seconds. It was a short time for someone, but it was as long as eternity for a demon who had even transcended time. If he wanted to, it wouldn't be impossible for him to eat Asel's mind on the spot. It was perhaps natural that Asel was trembling with anxiety.

But the whale didn't come toward Asel. Instead, it swam around him and rolled its eyes as if observing him.

-……Ah.

After 1 second passed, a clear voice, not the whale's cry, penetrated Asel's ears and into his brain.

-You are.

"Kahak!"

Just hearing the voice made him feel a pain as if his brain was being crushed. Blood was flowing from his nose and eyes, and his consciousness began to flicker at the terrible sensation that the ego of the person named 'I' was being forcibly scattered.

-I see.

Even in the midst of all this, the whale's, the demon's, voice continued. Asel somehow grabbed his mind and glared at the demon.

It took 3 seconds to get here.

Another second passed.

[Now……!]

0.5 seconds.

At the same time as Aleph's voice was heard, the whale's vertically split mouth opened.

-Father…….

"……What?"

The moment Asel's eyes widened at the completely unexpected muttering.

[It's over!]

"Ah, damn."

Asel's consciousness returned to reality. The seawater that had filled the surroundings was nowhere to be found, and the inside of the cave, full of cracked boulders, greeted him.

"……."

The blood flowing from his nose and eyes had also disappeared. His mind was clear, and his consciousness was clear. The sensations he had been feeling until just now were as faint as if they had become part of a dream.

But Asel knew that all the previous images he had seen like illusions were real. To be exact, his mind had been forcibly sucked into the world where the ritual was taking place. Judging from the reactions of the others, it was not difficult to infer that Asel was the only one who had been dragged in.

Then what's the reason?

'Is it because I used my blood in the ritual?'

Or is there another reason? What did the demon mean when he called me father? Why didn't Nom swallow me?

What exactly is the existence of a demon?

Questions led to more questions. In the end, Asel sighed deeply as he touched his mask with his hand.

Was it because he had seen the existence of a demon with his own eyes? The consumption of mental strength was no joke.

If he had been a person with a weak mental strength, it wouldn't have been strange if he had fainted on the spot.

The moment he thought so.

"The ritual has failed."

Asel raised his head as he saw Dunken, who had wiped the smile off his face, approaching.

"This is the first time this has happened. I've never failed once in hundreds of rituals……."

"……."

"Is it because there was an outsider mixed in? Are you the cause?"

"……There's a limit to jumping to conclusions."Pushing aside the flood of distractions, the worries about demons, the interpretation of illusions, and the doubts that poured out like a tsunami, Asel retorted in a calm voice."

"On the contrary, I'm even more displeased. I thought I'd have a chance to take a look at the demon summoning ritual. What is this? If I had known it would be like this, I wouldn't have cooperated in the first place."

"……."

"I just wasted my time. Get lost. No, no. Stay still. I'll tear you apart and kill you myself. You dared to throw my time and effort into the trash, so you have to pay the price."

"……Hahaha."

Dunken burst into laughter at Asel's words, which he spat out as if chewing them.

"I'm sorry! I guess I got excited! As I said, this is the first time this has happened! Please forgive me generously, won't you?"

"……."

"Silence is the same as agreement! Then I'll assume that I've been forgiven and move on. Thank you for your great generosity."

Dunken didn't even listen to Asel's answer and moved toward the girl who was standing still.

"More than that, what happened? The ritual was perfect. Was there a lack of sacrifices? No, that's not it. When I saw it, the value of the sacrifices was more than enough. Was there a lack of vessels? Hmm, that's not it either. The number of humans consumed to create this vessel alone could make a mountain. Then what is it? What's the cause?"

Dunken stood in front of Gorsel and tilted his head diagonally.

"Whatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhatwhat."

"……!"

"What do you think is the cause, Gorsel?"

He smiled and asked. Gorsel avoided Dunken's gaze and barely answered.

"……I don't know. The earth stabilization work was perfect."

"Really? Hmm……."

"……."

"Okay, I understand for now. If Gorsel says so, then that's what it is."

Dunken turned around while still smiling. Then he shouted to everyone.

"Shall we eat first? While analyzing the cause of the failure."

"……."

"You too, right, Ian?"

Dunken looked at Asel and added that. But Asel didn't care and walked toward the girl.

"You guys eat by yourselves. I'm going to examine this vessel."

"Hey, don't do that. How good is it to build friendship by eating together?" "Get lost."

Asel cut off Dunken's words and explosively burst out his Mana.

“Don’t make me say it twice.”

“……Alright. If that’s Ian’s wish.”

Fortunately, Dunken didn’t argue with Asel’s decision. Instead, he led the group out of the ritual chamber, adding a final remark as he left.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Creak, bang!

The doors of the ritual chamber slammed shut as Dunken disappeared. Asel pondered the meaning behind his words, then smirked and stood beside the girl.

[……Did they notice?]

“They’re probably just suspicious for now.”

Asel replied to Aleph’s anxious question.

“There’s no need to worry too much. They’ll be gone after today anyway.”

[That’s true, but… Ah, never mind. It’s strange for me to be trembling when you’re not too concerned, Master. More importantly, are you alright? You met the demon directly.]

“I’m fine. How about you?”

[There was a small price to pay, sacrificing 80% of my Mana, but I still have plenty to spare. Enough to advise you, Master.]

“Is that so.”

Asel chuckled and stroked Aleph.

There were scrying or surveillance Sorcery spells around, but distorting them made them as good as nonexistent. It would normally be a difficult technique, but it was nothing to Asel.

‘No need to worry about those guys noticing anything, no matter what I do here.’

Asel’s Mana manipulation skills were on par with those of a great mage. Even a Sorcerer of the same level wouldn’t be able to detect his Mana usage.

Thanks to that, Asel’s actions became a little bolder. He stared straight into the girl’s blood-soaked eyes and groaned.

It was then.

[Master.]

Aleph spoke to Asel. Asel grabbed a strand of the girl’s water-colored hair and tore it off as he replied.

“What?”

[How about I use this vessel’s body?]

“……What?”

Asel asked back, taken aback by the unexpected suggestion. Aleph floated out of Asel’s arms on its own and said.

[This woman’s body. I will use it.]

Author's Note

The upload was delayed because it was longer than I thought.

I'm just sorry.......

# 129 - Showtime

Aleph's words carried no hint of jest. This meant that everything she was currently saying stemmed from truth.

“......”

Asel had long known that Aleph desired a physical form. Hadn’t she already asked if she would be permitted to take on a body if the opportunity arose?

From that moment, Asel had anticipated that such a moment would eventually come, but she never dreamed it would arrive so quickly.

Still, she had resolved to smile and grant permission when that moment came. But now, behind her mask, Asel's expression was far from pleasant. It was a face filled with negativity that anyone could see.

It wasn't that she didn't trust Aleph.

Rather, there was a more rational reason.

“It’s a body that will become the vessel of a demon.”

Asel muttered as she released the girl’s hair that she had been holding.

“We don’t know what side effects there might be.”

If Aleph had wanted a pure human body, and if she had hoped to control it within an ethically acceptable situation by fortuitously discovering a brain-dead person, Asel would have told her to go ahead without hesitation.

But the girl before her was very difficult to consider a pure human.

Though she appeared human on the outside, her body was composed of the blood and flesh of countless people. It wasn’t assembled; it was recreated, making her closer to an independent entity than a mere mixture. Thus, a pure vessel for containing a demon was born, neither human nor monster.

A girl twisted by the very circumstances of her birth. She remained still because she had no self, but no one could predict what would happen the moment a self was created. Especially if that self belonged to a being other than a demon.

If there had been any information, Asel could have listened and made a judgment, but she knew nothing about the vessel of a demon. Aleph had only seen it being crushed and mangled, so she too had no idea what state it would be in if a being other than a demon were contained within.

That was why her judgment could only be passive.

If Asel had thought of Aleph as a mere book, she wouldn’t have tried to dissuade her. Even if Aleph said she would become strange when contained in the vessel, she would have simply dealt with it quickly and moved on to her tasks.

But it wasn’t that simple. Asel still retained the memories of the conversations and emotional exchanges she had shared with Aleph. It had been far too long for her to dismiss her as just a book.

Worrying about her was, in a way, only natural.

[......Hehe.]

Aleph noticed that worry as well. Since some emotions were shared, she couldn’t help but be aware of it.

And Aleph didn’t particularly dislike those emotions.

[I feel very pleased.]

“......”

[It’s quite fascinating that my master, who was once wary of me, is now concerned for me. I suppose this feeling can be described as joy. I have felt emotions before, but reflecting on them like this is a different kind of pleasure.]

“......Aleph.”

[The situation my master is worried about will not occur.]

Aleph, floating in the air, gently descended above the girl’s head.

[I can become any kind of being. Even a beast, if necessary. If the conditions are met, I can even seize the body of a demon’s apostle or the demon itself.]

“......”

[For someone like me, this empty shell will have no effect. Instead, it will be devoured by my overwhelming self.]

“Are you sure?”

[Absolutely. So, my master, there is no need for you to worry.]

Aleph’s voice overflowed with confidence. There was also a belief that she would surely succeed.

“......Alright.”

In the end, Asel moved behind the girl with a wry smile.

“I believe in your confidence.”

[I will repay you.]

With that, Aleph began to turn the pages.

Beyond the pages being flipped haphazardly, various formulas appeared and disappeared in a dazzling display. Brilliant blue Mana spread softly through the air and into the fabric of space and time.

[The method of seizing a body is simple.]

Asel’s Mana, which had filled the space, responded to Aleph’s will and gathered around the girl. It was a power that Asel could uproot at any moment if he wished, but he did not. He simply listened quietly to what Aleph had to say.

[I will now extract the brain of this vessel.]

“......What?”

He couldn’t help but open his mouth at those words.

Extracting the brain? Wasn’t that a bit too brutal from the very first step?

[To be precise, I will excise a part of the brain and insert a page inscribed with a symbol representing me into that area.]

“......”

[Then my formula will activate, and the control of the target’s brain, consciousness, and self will be transferred to me. I will be able to control the body whenever I want.]

“......Huh.”

[And this entire process requires my master’s permission. I believe I have already received it, but I will confirm once more.]

Aleph whispered in a low voice.

[Do you permit me to have a body and serve you forever, my master?]

“......Yes.”

Asel took a step back with a wry smile.

“Seize the vessel, Aleph.”

[I will carry out your will.]

As soon as the words left her mouth, the Mana Aleph summoned began to vibrate. The space roared as if it were howling, and a thick haze blossomed around the girl. If Asel hadn’t deployed a Mana Barrier, the outside world would have sensed the anomaly immediately.

[I will begin.]

The vibrating Mana responded to Aleph’s will. Asel focused on maintaining the barrier while catching the sweet scent that brushed past his nose.

[Incision.]

Whoosh!

A sharp wind sliced through a portion of the girl’s scalp, tearing it open. Surprisingly, no blood gushed forth. This was thanks to Aleph utilizing the Blood Magic that Asel knew.

[Opening.]

Beyond the unbleeding scalp, Aleph cut through the muscles and shattered part of the girl’s skull, exposing the brain and cerebral fluid. Just before it spilled out, two slender hands emerged from Aleph’s page and plunged into the girl’s head.

“......Cough.”

With that, the girl, who had remained silent until now, opened her mouth. However, the words she uttered were not coherent phrases but merely a short gasp.

[Death confirmed. Beginning extraction.]

Aleph severed the stem connecting to the spine and nervous system, skillfully infusing Mana into her fingers to cut away part of the brain. The neatly severed brain fragments scattered across the floor along with the cerebral fluid, and small pieces of Aleph’s pages filled the void left by the missing brain.

‘......Disgusting.’

It was a scene that was revolting both objectively and subjectively. But what could be done? Since Asel had granted permission, he could not escape responsibility. He had no choice but to witness the finishing stages.

[Entering the final stage. Formula activation. Consciousness theft successful. Self replication successful. Memory transfer successful. Knowledge replication successful. Consciousness pathway opened. Illusory space connection complete.]

“......”

[All stages executed without any errors. I will now transfer the self into the body of the girl, who has now become the vessel of a demon, ‘Aleph.’]

“......Ha.”

[Please welcome her warmly.]

With the end of Aleph’s words, a dark blue current surged into the girl’s head like a lightning strike.

Woom……!

The Mana unfolded. A recovery formula activated, and the wounds on the girl’s body healed on their own, while the blood and cerebral fluid that had stained her body evaporated and disappeared.

“......”

Asel took a step back and quietly observed the scene. He heightened his senses to the extreme, ready to use magic at any moment.

“......Ah.”

Finally, a proper voice flowed from the girl’s mouth. Asel’s eyes sharpened in response.

If he felt no trace of Aleph from the girl, if she had transformed into something that was no longer ‘Aleph’...

Asel would not hesitate to blow her head off. Then, he would retrieve Aleph, who was floating in the air, and do whatever it took to wake her up.

Aleph was confident in her success, but variables always arise from the arrogance of believing one is perfect. He had to be prepared for any eventuality.

“......Aleph?”

Asel cautiously called her name. The girl did not respond immediately; instead, she looked around with a dazed expression.

The water-colored Mana enveloping her entire body. It was a transparent, pale blue Mana that seemed to have been refined from Asel’s, orbiting around the girl. It was the same color as her eyes and hair.

The girl reached out to the Mana as if playing with water, but flinched as the cold touch of the Mana passed between her fingers.

In sync with that movement, her emaciated body swayed unsteadily.

“Ugh.”

Losing her balance, she fell to the ground. She blinked at the blood-soaked floor and quickly turned to Asel.

“Perhaps it’s due to malnutrition, but maintaining my balance is quite difficult.”

A familiar tone. However, unlike the cold voice Aleph used to send, a soft and calm voice penetrated Asel’s ears.

“Could you help me up? It seems difficult to rise on my own.”

She attempted to lift her body with her bony arms, then spread her arms toward Asel. Asel looked down at her lively eyes, which were overflowing with vitality, and barely managed to speak.

“......Is that really you, Aleph?”

“I am Aleph. But I must say, just having listened for a moment, my arms are hurting. Is this what pain feels like? Humans must have endured this while fighting. I feel like my shoulder is going to dislocate.”

“......”

“......Stop just staring and help me up. I am indeed Aleph. I understand your doubts, but if this goes on, my arms and shoulder muscles will surely be wrecked. I would prefer not to become disabled right after acquiring a body.”

Using a voice as calm and beautiful as the sea, she spoke in the same cold and stiff manner as Aleph.

Not knowing how to express her feelings, her distorted face was filled with awkwardness. Her trembling arms looked as if they might fall off at any moment, and she blinked her eyes, trying to dry them as much as possible before finally fluttering her eyelids.

Every movement seemed inexperienced and awkward. It was as if a beast had just gained a physical form, filled with precariousness and curiosity.

“Ah.”

From that, Asel was certain that the girl’s identity was Aleph.

But just to be sure, he went through one last verification process.

“Demon of Knowledge, say ‘bastard of the deep sea demon.’”

“Demon of Knowledge, bastards of all demons, including the deep sea demon. Just looking at those bastards who will one day die at my master’s hands makes me feel nauseous. Damn bastards. Bastards. Idiots raised by goblins after being abandoned by their parents!”

“I believe you. You are indeed Aleph.”

After completing the verification, Asel finally approached Aleph and helped her up. Aleph managed to rise with her trembling legs and exhaled a sigh.

“Is the human body really this weak? If I don’t close my eyes, it feels like I’m going to go crazy from the sting, I’m constantly aware of the position of my tongue, and if I don’t consciously breathe, it keeps stopping. Who designed this body? It’s a complete failure.”

“You’ll eventually get used to it without having to think about it.”

“Is that so? Since it’s my master’s words, I will believe it.”

As Aleph replied, she lifted her long bangs slightly and looked up at Asel’s face.

“So this is what my master looks like. It’s my first time seeing it from a third-person perspective.”

“......Haven’t you shared my vision? You must have seen it a lot in the mirror.”

“This feels very different from that. More importantly, this is objectively a handsome appearance by human standards. I have no particular feelings about it, though.”

“......”

“My sense of aesthetics is probably very different from humans. It’s hard to judge whether this is pretty or ugly subjectively.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Well, to be honest, how my master looks isn’t particularly important. Just the fact that you trust me is more than enough reason for me to serve you for a lifetime. Does appearance really matter?”

Aleph reached out and touched Asel’s face.

“Oooh...... So this is the texture of skin? I’ve learned something. It’s very soft. Though the bones are hard.”

“More importantly, what about the Mana?”

Asel brushed Aleph’s hand away and asked. His gaze turned to the water-colored Mana swirling around Aleph.

“Is the source my Mana, but has it changed since you gained a body? I can control it too.”

“That’s probably the case. It seems your Mana has transformed into a form suitable for this body to use.”

“Hmm......”

“This is my first time seeing something like this. My knowledge has increased. Yay!”

With an expressionless face, Aleph raised her arms as if celebrating. Asel chuckled and tore a suitable white curtain lying nearby, combining it to create a gown.

He draped the gown over Aleph’s shoulders.

“Put this on. It’s cold.”

“Hmm. It certainly was cold. I could feel my body temperature dropping. Thank you. I will wear it well.”

“Wrap Mana around your feet or deploy a Shield for protection. You can do that, right?”

“I am Aleph.”

In response to Asel’s question, Aleph answered in a strangely excited voice.

“That’s an easy task. It’s no different from telling me to breathe.”

“......You’re really excited.”

“Can you tell?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hohoho......”

Aleph let out an awkward laugh as she donned the gown. It seemed she wasn’t yet accustomed to speaking with her vocal cords.

“I’m all dressed. Since it was given by my master, it’s very warm.”

“How’s your condition?”

“It’s not great. But I don’t feel like I’m going to die. After all, it’s just a vessel. If it’s not an external injury, I shouldn’t faint or lose my life.”

“Is there anything strange related to the demon?”

“Yes. As I mentioned, I’m perfectly fine. I, Aleph, declare here that I am filled only with my self and loyalty and affection toward my master. There’s no room for any impurities to interfere.”

“......”

“I will live in this body for the rest of my life. I will return to being a book only when necessary.”

As Aleph said this, she tucked the former Aleph, now a useless piece of paper, under her armpit.

“May I use this useless scrap of paper? If I don’t hold it, I’ll become an ordinary person who can’t use magic even with my master’s Mana. I have no intention of becoming a weak girl who holds you back.”

“......Is it really okay to treat it like a scrap of paper, even though it’s your original form?”

“Since when was the book my original form? Break it, hardened moonlight. From now on, the blue-haired girl will be Aleph, and Aleph will be the blue-haired girl. A book? What’s that?”

“You’re really excited.”

“Yayhohohoho.”

Aleph laughed and spun around Asel.

“However, in order to use magic, my master must periodically recharge Mana into the book. That way, Mana will flow into my body as well.”

“......”

“Though there are two bodies, you can think of it as having one Mana Engine. If either one runs out, I become an ordinary person.”

“What happens to your consciousness if the Mana disappears? You used to lose consciousness immediately.”

“That won’t happen anymore. Whether it’s this body or the book, my mind will remain clear even if all the Mana is gone. However, I won’t be able to transfer my consciousness back into the book.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes. I am now a fuel-efficient and capable Aleph.”

Aleph tightly grasped Asel’s hand and rubbed her body against his.

“Hmm. I think I can already feel Master's favor. I'm pleased.”

“Well, seeing you happy makes me happy too.”

Asel gave a bitter smile and stroked her hair.

“But as you know, it’s not time to rest easy yet. I can’t move with you until I turn this place upside down, at least.”

“I know. Then what will you do? You’ve succeeded in destroying the ritual and finding their base, so will you proceed with the final stage of the plan?”

“That’s what I would have done originally. But now that you have a body, I think I need to change the plan a little.”

“How so?”

Aleph tilted her head and asked.

Asel grinned and adjusted the position of his mask.

“Haaam……”

Late at dawn. A time when everyone was asleep.

The moon had already waned considerably, and with not much time left until sunrise, Friede yawned and leaned back in her chair.

Fatigue weighed down on her entire body. She had spent time reading new papers on Magical Engineering research and new academic theories of spiritism that she had started again after a long time, and already the time was approaching twilight. The view outside the window, which she glanced at absentmindedly, was fiercely announcing that the night's demise was not far off.

“……I should probably go to sleep soon.”

It was already quite late, but to get through her schedule, it seemed like it would be good to get some sleep now, even if it was just a little. Friede thought so and got up.

“Kkeueueueueuk……!”

She stretched out her body as she stretched. Friede ruffled her disheveled hair with her hands and sipped the last of the tea in her cup.

And at that moment.

Knock knock!

She heard someone knocking hard on the window. When she turned her head, she saw a huge metal pigeon standing outside the window.

“……That’s.”

It was a Magical Engineering machine that Friede also knew. A Messenger bird used only in Wiheim. A great invention of Magical Engineering and a strange object that all sorts of mages had clung to in order to figure out its principles.

Currently, there were only three people in the Academy who could use that. And all three of them had statuses that made them difficult to treat carelessly.

“……I have a bad feeling about this.”

Friede swallowed hard, put down her teacup, opened the window, and brought the Messenger bird into her office. As if in a hurry, the Messenger bird opened the letter compartment as soon as it came inside and handed Friede a neatly folded letter.

Friede, realizing that the Messenger bird's actions were unusually urgent, unfolded the letter with a slightly hardened expression and read its contents.

Immediately afterward, her face twisted like a demon.

[Headmaster, this is Asel. The situation is urgent, so I will deliver the information quickly. Close to midnight, when I happened to go for a short walk outside the Academy. I saw demon worshipers kidnapping a woman who appeared to be an Academy student. I couldn't just stand by and watch, so I chased after them, and as a result, I was able to find their hideout.]

“……”

[I don't think I can handle them alone, so I'm requesting support as soon as possible. The Messenger bird will guide you to the location. Keep the number of people to a minimum and make sure you don't get caught.]

[It's just a request from a student, but I earnestly ask you to please grant it. Oh, please exclude my teacher from the plan. I don't want to worry her.]

“……Is this really written by Asel?”

Friede crumpled the letter and asked, her eyes gleaming. The Messenger bird shook its head like crazy, as if it were obvious.

[Kuruk! Kururuk!]

“……Hoo.”

At the fervent affirmation, Friede pressed her hand to her forehead. After a moment of doing so, she put on her coat with a face filled with anger and opened the door to her office.

“Wait at the northern bridgehead of the Academy. I'll gather some people and go.”

[Kuruk!]

“Good.”

Friede, hearing the Messenger bird's confident answer, moved her steps towards the faculty dormitory without hesitation. The Messenger bird stayed still until her back disappeared from sight, then tilted its head back and made a crying sound.

[Kuruk! Kururururuk! Kuruk, kururuk!]

The sound was as cheerful as if it were bursting into laughter.