# 131 - Showtime (3)

The darkness seeping out consumed the space, staining it with a sticky hue. It was as if the very perception of sight had been distorted by the mana deployment of a high-ranking sorcerer. The professors' faces stiffened slightly under the oppressive aura of black magic that blocked all five senses without distinguishing between allies and enemies.

"A seventh-tier black magician...! Black magic is one of the most difficult forms of magic to master...!"

"There are hardly any living high-ranking black magicians left. Where did this Nom come from?"

Due to the peculiar nature of black magic, its users were so few that they could be compared to those who practiced unique forms of magic.

Even if one were to learn it, the structure was such that it could easily drive one to madness, making it nearly impossible to attain a high tier. Those who managed to break through to become high-ranking sorcerers were often hunted down due to their insanity.

As a result, there were very few high-ranking black magicians left on the continent. The survivors were either being pursued or had long since gone into hiding.

In such a situation, a black magician specializing in shadow formulas had appeared without a sound. It was enough to surprise those who had once fought on the battlefield.

"Don't panic; let's do what we need to do."

However, Fernan, instead of being surprised, narrowed his eyes sharply and drew the sword at his waist.

Swish!

The swung sword cleaved through the darkness, bringing reality back into focus. He pointed the dripping aura of his sword at Gorsel and spoke in a cold voice.

"I didn't expect you to be a devil worshiper, Gorsel. You've deceived me well."

"......"

"However, now that I’ve noticed, I won’t let it slide."

Kiiiiiing...!!

Fernan's aura engine whirred violently, producing a sharp sound.

An aura master comparable to a grand sorcerer. A genius who reached mastery at a relatively young age. The swordsmanship instructor of the academy and a professor of combat survival, Fernan.

"Let's start by severing your limbs and then have a conversation."

He began to exude a clear hostility, radiating a murderous intent from his entire body. For Gorsel, whose tier was still significantly low, merely facing him was enough to break out in a cold sweat. With Dunken gone, there was no one to mediate their emotions.

Though he had confidently declared he would carve a path, reality and imagination were vastly different. He thought that if he focused solely on fleeing without actively engaging in combat, even the academy professors would be easy to shake off... but now it seemed that merely concentrating on survival would be a challenge.

Still, there was a strong individual comparable to Dunken. A powerful being who did not fall short even against the academy professors was present here. Gorsel swallowed hard and shifted his gaze to Asel, who was tilting his head.

"......"

A piercing gaze struck the back of his head. Asel noticed it too but chose not to speak. Instead, after a brief silence, he walked toward the academy professors.

He then casually remarked.

"Do as you wish with them, whether you capture or kill them. As I said, my time is precious."

"......What did you say?"

One of the professors, unable to comprehend Asel's words, asked again. Asel replied irritably while continuing to walk.

"I have no obligation to spill blood for them. I will take my leave now, so do as you see fit with the rest. If you understand, get lost."

"......Who do you think you’re calling an idiot?"

Among the professors, the youngest-looking one bared his teeth and growled at Asel. He gathered mana as if he would use magic at any moment and blocked Asel's path.

"You will die here today. There are no exceptions."

"......"

"If time is so important to you, I will kill you first. My time is precious too."

Was it because he was facing a devil worshiper? Or was it due to the fact that an academy student might have been kidnapped?

The usually mild-mannered combat department professor openly displaying hostility was quite a sacred scene for Asel. He smirked inwardly while outwardly maintaining the demeanor of an arrogant black magician.

"Is that so?"

He said, poking his hand into his coat pocket.

"Then die."

Kwaaaang!!!

Darkness exploded at Asel's feet like a bomb. The writhing darkness split apart like waves, and beyond it, a shadow with countless teeth opened its maw to devour the professor's legs.

"......!"

The stealthy mana movement was almost imperceptible. However, the slight distortion that emerged from the magic Asel used was faintly detectable to the academy professors.

This was somewhat intentional. Asel could have used stealthy mana movement at any time, but he was not foolish enough to use it in the current situation.

'Adjust the situation so that everyone remains safe, without any damage occurring.'

It didn't matter if the devil worshipers died. But he hoped that the professors would not suffer even a small scratch. That was why he had cast enhancement magic on Friede.

Even now, the openly manifested black magic concealed various enhancement spells that circulated within the professors' bodies, further strengthening their powers.

"Not a chance!"

Thanks to that, the professors were able to fend off Asel's magic. Of course, that did not mean it was easy. One professor, who had swung his sword to fend off the shadow, grimaced in pain as if his bones were rattling.

"What kind of magic power...!!"

"Don't let your guard down, Cyrus! It's coming again!"

"Damn it!"

The severed shadows seemed to split and divide, pressing the professors from both sides. The theoretical magic professor attempted to counter with Radiance Magic, but the darkness easily consumed the light, erasing the very concept of space.

Shadows lurked everywhere, restricting direction, distance, and visibility, forming an area that was simply dark. While it had no power in itself, if other magic were to be manifested within it, the story would change.

Gurgle...!

An ominous sound echoed from the darkness that surrounded them like boiling water. Moments later, sharp-toothed maws sprang out from above, below, left, and right, physically biting at the professors' magic and swords.

Naturally, the professors were not just sitting back and taking it. They struck back against the encroaching shadows and surged toward Asel like beams of light. A swordsman swung his sword with a speed faster than sound, aiming directly for his neck.

[Black Tide]

In that moment, the darkness that dominated the space converged right in front of Asel's face and began to pour forth like a wave.

Kwaaaang!!!

The physical darkness pushed the very space away. It destroyed the stairs leading down into the cave and wreaked havoc on the rooms created here, devouring documents and tools.

"Cough...!!"

"Secure the barrier! We're being swept away!"

"I will deploy defensive magic! Everyone, fall back!"

The swordsman who swung his sword, Fernan, who was facing Gorsel from behind, and the magician who was chanting spells—all were forcibly ejected toward the ground by the wave. The reverse surge of the waterfall expelled both the professors and the devil worshipers.

"Did I fail to kill them?"

Asel, who had calmly ascended the stairs, rubbed his sore wrist and looked back at them.

"Well, it’s fine. This has opened an escape route."

"......It wasn't the time to worry about Gorsel."

Fernan, with a cold expression, spat toward Asel.

"Are you the de facto leader here?"

"I'm not one to cling to the title of king of insects. I wouldn't want that even if you offered it to me."

"......Internal division, is it?"

"Think for yourself."

Asel casually replied and irritably directed his words toward Dellim and Gorsel, who were drenched in the black wave.

"How long are you going to just watch?"

"......"

"If you want to confirm that you're useless, then die doing so. Don't just hide."

"You talk big."

Dellim smiled and playfully tapped Asel on the shoulder.

"I like you."

"Get lost."

Instead of getting angry at Asel's hostile response, Dellim laughed heartily and charged at the professors. In that moment, the blade she held suddenly grew enormous, stretching to three times her height.

One of the professors, seeing this, gasped and drew the great sword he had been carrying on his back.

"Coordinated swordsmanship! That must be a technique long since severed in exchange for power from demons...!!"

"Hahaha!! You know me!"

Whoosh...!!

Every time her blade moved, the air trembled heavily, producing a deep sound. However, the speed of the sword was not slow; it was, in fact, incredibly fast.

An irrational great sword that seemed to deny physics itself. The blade, wrapped in a storm of splitting wind, collided with the professor's great sword from the side.

Kwaaaang!!

With a massive explosion, it violently slashed through the surroundings. Trees that could not withstand the sword wind were torn apart, replaced by deep black marks.

"......"

The ignorant power of the swordsmanship scraped the ground and tore through trees. Asel, who had viewed Dellim as nothing more than a simple man-eater, was slightly taken aback.

"Were you there too? On the day our sect was destroyed, were you there?!"

Dellim shouted as she pressed down on the professor's body. The professor, gritting his teeth, swung his great sword to deflect the clashing blades and thrust his sword toward Dellim's heart.

"A sect that took power in exchange for cannibalism! It was more than enough to warrant extermination! It is only natural for a swordsman pursuing the righteous path to join in that glory!"

"You were there!"

Hearing the professor's response, Dellim smiled brightly and stomped on the thrusting sword, leaping into the air. She then positioned herself to look down at him from above, having torn through the space.

"Alright! I'll kill you first!"

"Come on, you damned man-eater. I will personally deal with the demon you let slip that day."

"Kyaahahaha!!"

Dellim burst into a mad laugh, while the professor composed himself, preparing his imagery. Gorsel grimaced at the sight.

"That stupid girl! I told her to prioritize escaping, why is she causing a ruckus?!"

"Is escaping the priority?"

"......!"

Above Gorsel's head, a massive blade resembling a flower's petal descended. Gorsel hurriedly scraped together dirt to form a barrier.

Thud thud thud!!

The falling blades pounded against the barrier before disappearing. Just as the barrier was about halfway torn apart, a dirt-colored spear shot out at high speed from within.

"Flower magic. As one who walks that path."

The professor, facing the incoming spear with a gloomy expression, formed a seal.

Swoosh!!!

With every movement of his hand, red flowers bloomed in the air, blocking the professor's front like a shield. When the spear finally touched the flowers, five blossoms shattered, and the spear drawn by Gorsel melted away.

"I held a fondness for you, a druid."

The professor spoke while looking down at the petals and earth that had become one with nature.

"To think you are a devil worshiper. How could such a farcical situation arise...?"

"......"

"But this is reality. So I will correct it. I, who once looked upon you favorably, will cleanse my feelings by killing you myself."

"You've gone mad. Is that something an academy professor should say?"

"Are you my student?"

"......What?"

"If not, then I do not think normally. That is the constraint I chose upon reaching the seventh tier."

From the feet of the professor, Floz, multicolored flowers bloomed.

"I can only refrain from harboring murderous intent toward those I recognize as students."

"......"

"That does not apply to you, Gorsel."

"Really?"

Gorsel grinned and slammed both hands down on the ground.

"Do you know how useless Flower Magic is against druids?"

"I know. That is why I intend to kill you."

Floz said this as he began to chant. Gorsel quickly expanded his intellect, shaking the ground. The blooming flowers and the rising earth collided, scattering petals and soil dust in all directions.

Meanwhile...

"......"

Asel, facing three professors classified as strong, smirked.

"One thing is certain."

At that moment, Fernan narrowed his eyes and aimed his sword at Asel.

"You are dangerous. If we do not deal with you here, you will become an even greater evil in the future, staining the world with darkness."

"......"

"Thus, I will eliminate you before that happens."

"Such grand words."

Asel replied with a scoff, placing a hand on his neck.

"You speak so grandly, yet lack the means to realize it."

...Ssssh.

From behind him, dozens of arms made of darkness slowly crawled out.

Each one was a medium imbued with mana.

As if yearning for something, the hands stretched toward the air, fluttering.

[Black Hand]

[Death's Grasp]

The hands, recognizing living beings, writhed with clear hostility in that moment.

"I have no hobby of repeating myself."

Asel spoke in a flat voice.

"Get lost."

# 132 - Showtime (4)

“How arrogant,” Cyrus, the Magical Department professor in charge of theoretical Mana Fluid Dynamics, muttered with a cigar in his mouth. Asel’s head turned towards him, and countless black hands, spread wide like a peacock’s tail, writhed as if ready to tear him apart at any moment.

A form of magic never seen before. Recreated by combining it with Shadow Arts, Asel’s unique black magic, born for the first time in this world.

Its mechanism, power, and speed were bizarre to the point of being unpredictable. Even Cyrus, who had traversed countless battlefields, felt a sense of unease.

But he wasn’t intimidated. Rather, he stared at Asel with eyes blazing with fighting spirit, grabbing the end of his cigar and crushing it.

Fzzzzz……!!

The gauntlets encasing his arms activated, reacting to Cyrus’s Mana.

Cyrus was a Flame Sorcerer belonging to the Ignis Magic Tower, and a rare combatant even among them.

A unique individual who combined magic with martial arts. The martial arts he unleashed, utilizing the propulsion, emission, and firepower unique to Flame Spells, were powerful enough to rival even typical Aura-using martial artists.

Contributing to this were the silver gauntlets and armor encasing his arms and legs.

Magical Engineering creations equipped with various heat control devices, emitters, and engines. Powered by Mana, made solely for Flame Sorcerers.

One of the best at wielding them was revealing his hostility, aiming to incinerate Asel.

“I’ll start by roasting one of your legs. That should knock some of that arrogance off.”

Clang!

The crushed end of the cigar ignited, and pure white steam began to rise from his gauntlets.

Controlling the heat unique to Flame Spells through mechanical devices. A cooling method completely different from typical Flame Spells. Perhaps a technique possible because his Uniqueness was related to martial arts.

‘Professor Cyrus is genuinely engaging in combat for the first time today. I should take this opportunity to observe thoroughly, and imitate the mechanical devices if I ever have the chance to use them.’

After finishing his thought, Asel tilted his head to the left, adjusting the position of his mask.

“Incinerate, you say……”

He chuckled, scattering a gleam from within his mask.

“In the first place, can you even catch me?”

“You’ll find out if you watch!”

An open provocation. Cyrus didn’t ignore it; instead, he gladly accepted it and accelerated towards Asel.

Kwaaaa!!

Flames erupted from the back of the armor encasing his legs. Acceleration using the repulsion and firepower unique to Flame Spells as propellant. In the blink of an eye, Cyrus reached right in front of Asel and threw a punch towards Asel’s chin.

[Frame Fist]

Clang, Screech!!

The upper part of the gauntlet opened, and heat and flames spewed out madly. Asel calmly watched the scene, then snapped his fingers.

At the same time, the hands writhing behind Asel’s back turned towards Cyrus all at once. The black arms, twisted grotesquely as if the number of joints wasn’t limited, grabbed Cyrus’s fist and pressed down in reverse.

Kwaaaang!!

The moment the crimson silver gauntlet collided with the sticky black hands, flames erupted, blocking Asel’s vision.

Asel was internally impressed by the heat, which would have melted his entire face if he didn’t have a Shield.

Swish……!!

Fernan’s sword smoothly pierced in from a blind spot. Asel dodged the blade by slightly twisting his head, and this time as well, he moved his hand to firmly grab and stop his sword.

A combat method that neutralized the sword itself rather than the swordsman. It wasn’t efficient, but it was enough to create a momentary opening.

[Mystic Threads]

Whirr……!!

Black threads that shot up from Asel’s feet were launched, aiming for Fernan’s entire body. Fernan looked down at them with an expressionless face, then raised one corner of his mouth and slammed his foot down hard.

At the same time, Aura was released from his entire body. The magic Asel was manifesting shook all at once, and the hands grabbing Cyrus’s gauntlet and Fernan’s sword shattered.

“……!”

It was an incredibly crude method of Aura manipulation. Asel’s eyes widened behind the mask.

But the surprise was only momentary. Asel quickly regained his composure and relaxed his body, avoiding the incoming gauntlet and blade.

At the same time, the floor turned black and swallowed Asel’s body whole.

“Damn it……! Did he escape?”

The black magician had disappeared in an instant. Cyrus muttered as he touched his broken gauntlet.

Poof!!

Suddenly, a black sphere bloomed in the sky, and five black arms shot out from within at high speed. From the sky to the ground. Cyrus gritted his teeth and deployed magic in response to the completely reversed attack.

“Behind you!”

And along with that, another professor who was chanting magic shouted loudly. Cyrus didn’t immediately counter Asel’s magic; instead, he leaped back.

Whoosh!!!

A giant sphere of light flew past his ear. The aftermath alone sounded like the air itself was exploding.

A bombardment spell fired accurately at Asel in the sky. Asel, sitting on top of the black sphere, tilted his head as if amused and muttered.

“Radiance Art. A rare high-level bombardment spell even among them. It seems the name of academy professor isn’t just for show.”

Radiance-type magic is fundamentally unsuitable for combat. Rather, it’s a type of magic closer to assisting combat or guiding the flow of the battlefield. But that didn’t mean it couldn’t respond to combat at all.

The sphere of light flying towards him was proof of that.

A regular icosahedron wrapped in brilliant light. An overwhelming radiance that annihilated everything it touched. A bombardment that rivaled the power of the upper ranks even among high-level magic, no different from a Radiance Sorcerer’s trump card.

It was a magic that didn’t have a good compatibility with the Shadow Arts that Asel wielded. Light could push back or weaken darkness or shadows.

But it wasn’t a big problem for Asel. He waved his hand, looking down at the professor standing below with a strained expression.

“This is a reward for showing me something interesting.”

Black threads gathered above his hand, forming a gauntlet. Cyrus and Fernan immediately reacted to the ominous energy.

“High-level black magic.”

The shadow covering Asel’s hand dripped downwards. A proper high-level black magic that operated in a completely different way from the Shadow Arts he had been using until now, being shown for the first time.

“The Seventh Precept.”

Creak……!!

“Fernaaaaaan!!!”

“Damn it. Imagery Opㅡ”

“Sorrow.”

At the same time as he spoke, Asel slashed his blackened hand from top to bottom.

His hand moved smoothly, as if stirring water.

Immediately after.

“……!”

The senses disappeared from the world.

Vision was blocked. Nothing could be seen. It was impossible to even observe one’s own body.

Smell was blocked. The scents of blood, flowers, and nature that had been wafting around disappeared.

Hearing was blocked. Taste disappeared. Touch was distorted.

An alien sensation that made one question whether they were standing, lying down, sitting, or even alive in the first place. A disturbing feeling that even that sensation had to rely on imagination.

Because the five senses were blocked, the flow of Mana was also not free. Mana, having lost its direction of where and how to extend, leaked out as if it were seeping. The speed of that was beyond estimation.

Cyrus’s Uniqueness rusted. Because it had lost its direction, it became virtually impossible to deploy magic.

Fernan was the same. The situation was better than Cyrus’s, but even so, distortions occurred in his Imagery. Like a giant cogwheel had broken, it was possible to recall things, but it was impossible to release his thoughts outwards. Aura didn’t listen to his commands either.

The Radiance Sorcerer, who had faced Sorrow head-on, was in an even more serious situation. She stared at the sky with empty eyes, or at least she thought she was, and knelt down and collapsed.

The next moment.

……Swish.

Black rainwater poured down from above. The rainwater, writhing as if it had a will of its own, slowly began to erode the bodies of the three people exposed within the range of the magic. Even at that moment, they didn’t realize they were being eroded.

It’s raining.

It’s raining.

It rained.

It rai.

It ra.

…….

Is it raining?

The three people stopped moving as if they were broken. Asel stared at them blankly, then exhaled and came down to the ground.

‘Mana consumption is extreme.’

Black Magic Seventh Precept, Sorrow. A high-level black magic that steals all senses, including the five senses, from those exposed to the magic, and kills them by eroding their very existence.

Asel, who simply poured Mana into black magic that could only be used if one fundamentally possessed Imagery. The stronger the magic, the more Mana was consumed.

It was true that efficiency had improved compared to when he used pure black magic because he combined it with Shadow Arts, but that didn’t mean he could spam it like other spells.

That’s why he had engaged in combat more passively than when he used Electrification Art. If he used it recklessly, he would quickly become exhausted.

As a result, it was the right thing to do.

Whether it was because the goal was capture, or because the battle itself was led passively, the academy professors didn’t come on strong from the beginning. Rather, they were slowly raising their output as if they were testing the waters.

If Asel had come on strong from the beginning, they would have given up on capturing him and would have been serious about killing him.

It would have been the worst ending for Asel. No matter how strong he was, he couldn’t have survived against multiple 7th Circle mages and a swordsman who was an Aura master. It probably wouldn’t have been easy to escape either.

‘If Professor Fernan had opened his Imagery from the start of the battle, the situation would have become serious. I might have had to reveal my identity.’

Just imagining it was terrifying. The moment he was branded as a demon worshiper, Asel would become an outsider in this continent.

He would probably have to liquidate all the relationships he had built up until now and wander the continent.

Fortunately, he didn’t reach such an ending. Asel turned his stiff neck and looked at the professors standing with empty eyes.

‘Sorrow is a magic that leads to death, but it takes a long time to actually kill. There’s nothing wrong with recovering it before that. There won’t be any aftereffects either.’

He felt guilty towards the professors, but this was the best he could do. There was no other way to identify Gorsel and obtain information about demons.

‘The problem is the demon worshiper hidden among the academy faculty…….’

How should he extract that guy?

Asel groaned and was worrying about it when.

“Ian.”

Gorsel, who had been fighting Floz, appeared with a perfectly fine face and called Asel’s alias. Asel turned his head towards him with an expressionless face, then frowned when he saw Floz’s face standing next to him.

“……Why are you two together?”

“Well, that’s because I’m the demon worshiper who infiltrated the academy.”

She smiled brightly and reached out her hand towards Asel. Gorsel tilted his head back as if he was tired, and Floz exclaimed in admiration as he looked at the three professors standing motionless.

The sudden confession left Asel speechless. Whether he did or not, Floz threw away all the solemnity he had shown until now and looked at Asel with pure goodwill.

“Even if you’re strong, to be able to incapacitate the professors like this. Amazing. You have a very outstanding talent.”

“……You’re the demon worshiper who infiltrated the academy?”

“Ah, should I have said that first?”

Floz scratched his head and answered.

“It’s not a big deal. I just took advantage of the academy’s weaknesses and got a job under false pretenses. The reason I came here wasn’t to catch you, but to support you. Do you understand now?”

Gorsel roughly accepted Floz’s words.

“The spy I mentioned last time. That’s Floz. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“…….”

“If you understand, hurry up and deal with those guys and move. Support Dellim. After that, find Dunken, who hasn’t returned yet, and then—"

"No.”

Asel cut off Gorsel’s words. He met the gazes of Gorsel and Floz, who were looking at him questioningly, and spat out in a cold voice.

“There’s no need for that."......What are youㅡ"

Swoosh!

The moment Gorsel’s words continued. The black sphere that was still floating in the sky transformed into the shape of a sword. It fell as it was, piercing through Floz’s crown and popping out of his buttocks.

“……Huh?”

A sudden attack. Gorsel made a strange noise at the completely unexpected surprise attack.

“Uh…… Ra……?”

Floz opened his mouth in a stuttering tone. Asel stared at him without any answer, then snapped his fingers.

At the same time, the sword that pierced Floz rotated, tearing his body to shreds. She, who had instantly become a simple lump of flesh, was scattered on the floor.

Gorsel stared at it with a blank expression, then distorted his face like a demon and glared at Asel.

“You son of a bitch! What the hell are you doing all of a sudden!”

“The play is over now.”

“……!”

The tone of voice changed in an instant. The arrogance and annoyance disappeared, and Gorsel frowned and took a step back at the voice full of fatigue.

“..........You.”

“Hoo.”

Ignoring him, Asel slowly took off his mask.

The face that was revealed like that.

“……! You are……!”

“Aleph. What’s the situation?”

[Girzen has been eliminated. Should I go up now?]

“Come soon. I’ll join you in my original identity.”

“You, why are you here……!”

[Confirmed. Moving.]

“Asel……!”

“Everyone surprised?”

Gorsel’s green eyes trembled. Asel chuckled as he looked at them.

He roughly burned away the coat he was wearing and came back in a light shirt, loosening his shoulders.

Crackle.

Blue lightning burst from his entire body, electrifying the air.

“This is much more comfortable after all. Black magic is still difficult to use.”

“You tricked me! Since when……!”

“You’re not particularly curious, are you?”

Asel smiled slightly and stared straight at Gorsel.

There were no gazes watching from around. The three professors, including Fernan, were still motionless, but they would be freely released again in just one minute from now.

If he dealt with Gorsel in front of him, it meant that no one would be able to realize that Asel’s identity was a black magician. Asel tilted his head as he looked at Gorsel, who was raising his magic power while rattling with betrayal and hatred.

“I just joined. The black magician Ian already ran away first, and you killed Floz. I witnessed that scene, finished judging the situation, and dealt with you.”

“Bullshit……!”

“Well.”

Rumble!!

The rising lightning grew in size in the air, forming a huge aggregate of lightning. Gorsel looked up at it with a pale face.

Asel drew his finger down and spat out.

“I don’t think it’s up to you to judge.”

[Lightning Strike]

Kwaaaaaaaang!!!

# 133 - Showtime (5)

A vertical lightning bolt sears through Gorsel's body, burning him alive.

KWA-AAAAANG!!!

The sound trails off like a comet's tail. The world momentarily turns a vivid blue, and a massive shockwave erupts, electrifying everything around.

“...Kuh.”

The lightning strike was instantaneous, but the aftermath was devastating.

Gorsel, struck directly by high-level lightning magic. His limbs were gruesomely torn apart, and his head was charred to the point where it was hard to recognize. From his ruptured abdomen, molten red blood dripped and evaporated simultaneously.

The only reason he hadn’t died instantly was that he was a druid who harnessed the power of the earth. Some parts of his body were integrated with the ground, allowing him to disperse the force of the lightning.

Whether that was fortunate for him was uncertain, but he had survived, albeit precariously.

“...Kah... Kek...”

A groan escaped his scorched lips.

He had no interest in relishing someone else's suffering. Even if the opponent was an enemy, it was better for one’s conscience to send them off quickly if the goal wasn’t interrogation or information gathering, and it also eliminated future troubles.

Thus, there was no hesitation in his actions.

“Farewell.”

Asel immediately shot another bolt of lightning at Gorsel, piercing through the top of his head.

ZAP!

The dark blue lightning coursed through his entire body, turning his brain and heart to ashes.

No matter how much a druid could regenerate by consuming earth, they couldn’t come back to life if their vital organs were destroyed. Asel glanced down at Gorsel’s charred corpse for a moment before sensing a blade flying toward him at an angle and twisting his head away.

SWISH!!

A massive blade grazed the tip of Asel's nose and embedded itself in a tree. Turning his expressionless face, he saw Dellim gripping the sword tightly.

“What the hell was that? I thought something was happening when the lightning struck out of nowhere...”

Her body was drenched in blood.

All of it was hers. There were no signs of blood splatter from outside. It was evidence that the battle had been overwhelmingly one-sided.

She must have come here after barely dealing with the professor.

She briefly glanced at Asel before smirking at the two fallen demon worshippers on the ground.

“You killed them, huh? Both Gorsel and Floz.”

“...”

“Where the hell did you pop out from? And where’s Ian?”

“He ran away.”

Asel turned his body toward her, loosening his stiff shoulders. Dellim swallowed hard as she met his cool gaze and smiled.

“Unfortunately, I missed the dark sorcerer, but I succeeded in taking this one down. Are you next?”

“Hah, who’s going to die so easily?”

Dellim raised her sword and licked the blood from her lips. At that moment, the professor, who had approached rapidly from behind her, swung his sword vertically.

KRAK!!!

Dellim reflexively raised her sword to block the attack, twisting her body to evade. The heavy greatsword, having lost its target, slammed into the ground, and Dellim climbed the tree like a beast, moving to a higher vantage point.

The professor glared at her and shouted.

“Don’t run away! Were all those threats to kill just lies?”

“Professor Isaac.”

“Hm? That voice is...”

The professor, who had been fiercely glaring at Dellim, recognized Asel's voice and turned his head.

“Asel! Where have you been all this time? Are you hurt?”

“I was looking for a back entrance to the cave nearby when I heard the commotion and came back. I’m not hurt.”

“Thank goodness, thank goodness!”

Isaac patted Asel on the back, laughing. Asel smiled back at him briefly before shifting his gaze to Dellim and channeling his Mana.

“I’ll help. I’ll provide rear support, so fight as much as you want.”

“Haha, receiving help from a student. It’s a bit embarrassing, but if the target is a 7th-tier mage, it’s a different story. I’ll rely on you.”

Isaac adjusted his grip on the greatsword. Asel exhaled briefly and stood behind Isaac, preparing his magic.

[Summon] ZAP!!!

A ring of lightning formed above Asel’s head. Like an angel’s halo, currents of electricity gathered within the ring.

The moment the power, exceeding limits, seemed ready to be unleashed.

“Oh no, that won’t do.”

“...!”

Dunken appeared before Asel in an instant, thrusting a dagger toward his heart.

A dagger coated in all sorts of curses. Just as the dagger, which had torn through dozens of Shields like paper, was about to touch Asel's skin, he barely twisted the direction of the Summon and shot it toward Dunken’s face.

“Ugh!”

A mad technique that twisted a pre-determined spell to strike in an entirely different direction.

Caught off guard by the unexpected counterattack, Dunken screamed and fell backward. Asel quickly restored his Shields and turned his head toward Isaac.

“Running away covered in blood looks just like a damn dog!”

“Hahaha!! Does this look like running away to you? Have you got something in your eyes?”

Isaac was already engaged in combat with Dellim. Although he had claimed he would support her, the situation changed abruptly with Dunken’s intervention. Asel hardened his expression calmly and glared at Dunken.

“Wow! Lightning magic really is something. I got hit once, and one of my talismans is gone.”

“Are you a Sorcerer?”

“Correct!”

Dunken sprang to his feet, grinning.

His body, which had surely been struck by lightning, looked no different than before. Blood dripped from his forearm, but there were no signs of burns from the lightning.

Asel realized that it was thanks to the Sorcery he used.

“Do you redirect damage to a talisman you prepared in advance every time you take a fatal wound?”

“Oh, you’re sharp. You seem to have some understanding of Sorcery?”

“It’s one of the most common types of Sorcery. A gold spell that uses the lives and souls of others as a price. A Sorcerer’s second heart, similar to a lich’s life vessel. Isn’t that what the talisman is?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s more complicated, but that’s roughly correct.”

Dunken brushed off the dirt on his clothes as he spoke.

“More importantly, it’s nice to meet you, Ena’s disciple. I don’t know why you’re here, but I consider it an honor to meet the youngest 7th-tier mage.”

“I don’t need the glory of a demon worshipper.”

“Is that so? But there’s a saying that even dust can make a mountain. Don’t dislike it too much.”

Dunken smiled amiably, twirling the dagger in his hand. Asel ignited lightning throughout his body, fixing his gaze coldly.

“Where’s the dean?”

“He should be chasing after us by now. I invested half of my soul to reverse the direction toward the academy. He should be back in about five minutes.”

“...”

“Wow, but still, 8th-tier is 8th-tier. I thought I could hold my own against a relatively weak archmage in this state, but 90% of my talismans are gone. A mage who uses freezing spells and spirit spells is indeed troublesome. Not to mention the strong physical abilities typical of elves.”

Dunken grinned as he stabbed the dagger he held into his thigh. The moment Asel narrowed his eyes at the sudden self-harm, a surge of Sorcery Power explosively erupted from his entire body.

The entire forest shook with the overwhelming Sorcery Power. The resentment, curses, and the life of others chosen by the Sorcerer were all unleashed with full force.

It was an amount of Sorcery Power that was absurd to say he had fought an 8th-tier archmage. It was likely due to the bizarre amount of souls he usually possessed.

“Unfortunately, this is where our meeting ends.”

Dunken smiled as he stared directly into Asel’s eyes.

“Ian seems to have run away, and Gorsel and Floz are already dead. I don’t sense Girzen’s life response either. It seems that only Dellim and I are left...”

“Are you kidding? Do you think I’ll let you go that easily?”

“Feel free to interfere. Unlike magic, Sorcery can still be cast even if there’s interference. Isn’t that convenient?”

“...Tsk.”

Asel clicked his tongue and shot lightning toward Dunken’s heart. Dunken, receiving the lightning without any resistance, smiled faintly and rubbed his chest.

“One more talisman has flown away. What a pity. Well, I still have plenty left. About a thousand or so?”

“...You’re insane. You still have that much left after using so many?”

“I’ve consumed a lot. Despite how I look, I’m a pig, a pig. And if you want to interfere, go ahead. As long as the dagger is embedded in me, my body won’t shake, the Sorcery will soon be complete, and I can take over a hundred fatal wounds.”

The facts he stated with a deadpan expression were unsettling. Asel frowned in displeasure and continued to unleash magic toward him. He didn’t want to remain idle.

KWA-AAAAAA!!!

Countless bolts of lightning struck Dunken’s body. Dunken let out a low growl as he absorbed them, then smiled and waved his hand as if greeting.

“Alright. It’s complete.”

At that moment, Dellim, who had been fending off Isaac’s attack, suddenly teleported beside Dunken.

“Huh? What’s going on, Dunken?”

With a blood-soaked face, Dellim looked up at Dunken. Dunken gently brushed aside her hair stuck to her forehead, smiling.

“Let’s go, Dellim. We’re taking too much damage. We’re retreating.”

“We haven’t decided the winner yet! And what the hell is this damn lightning?!”

“It’s our great mage interfering. Don’t worry; I’m blocking the lightning aimed at you.”

“I don’t care about that! Let me keep fighting that bastard! I’m not running away!”

“That’s not possible. Do you know how I brought you here?”

Dunken protected Dellim from the rain of lightning, grabbing her by the nape of her neck.

“I’m the one who revived you as a Sorcery Object when you were dying. I must follow the creator’s orders.”

“Kek!”

“If you understand, I’ll be leaving now. Your opinion was never important anyway.”

Receiving his 152nd fatal wound, Dunken turned to look at Asel.

Behind him, the professors who had been affected by despair were gradually regaining their senses. He could also feel a powerful presence approaching from a distance.

It belonged to Friede. There was no more time to waste.

“It’s a pity I couldn’t prepare a vessel for that person, but now that Girzen is dead, there’s no reason to take a gamble. So, goodbye.”

“...Damn it.”

“See you next time, Asel. Let’s have a chat while smiling then.”

As he spoke, the dagger embedded in Dunken’s thigh flickered, and a side door burst open at his feet. Dunken, still holding onto Dellim’s nape, quickly fell through.

“...”

A passage whose destination was unknown. Following it would be akin to committing suicide. Asel let out a deep sigh and ran his hand through his hair.

“Did they escape?”

Isaac, who arrived late, clicked his tongue at the traces of Sorcery left on the ground. Asel nodded with a bitter smile.

“I’m sorry. It was impossible for me to stop them with my abilities.”

“Don’t blame yourself. He’s a Sorcerer who couldn’t even kill the dean. Just holding him back for a moment was enough. More importantly, where’s the dean?”

In response to Isaac’s question, Asel relayed Dunken’s words to him. Isaac let out a hollow laugh and shook his head.

“Unbelievable. No matter how strong a Sorcerer is, forcibly teleporting the dean... It seems he didn’t gain his power merely through human sacrifice.”

“Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine. The blood on me isn’t mine; it’s that woman’s. I felt stronger than usual. It’s probably thanks to that.”

He meant it was due to the enhancement magic Asel had continuously provided. He chuckled and looked down at the two corpses lying on the ground. Isaac followed suit and turned his head.

“One is Gorsel, and the other is Floz. What a shame. In the end, one professor has died.”

“No, Floz was also one of the demon worshippers.”

“...What?”

“She was one of the people inserted from that side. I saw her talking with Gorsel.”

“Really...?”

“It may be hard for you to believe, but it’s true. If you perform an autopsy on the corpses and have the church examine them, you’ll get confirmation.”

“...”

Due to Asel’s tone, which was almost certain, Isaac couldn’t easily believe it, yet he couldn’t outright deny his words either. He let out a deep sigh, wiping the blood from his cheek.

“...What happened?”

At that moment, the professors who had awakened from ‘despair’ quickly approached them, asking in urgent voices. Asel, taking the anxious Isaac’s place, provided them with additional explanations.

“...I see.”

Fernan, who had been ready to open his Imagery at any moment, sighed deeply upon hearing Asel’s explanation and sheathed his sword.

“I’m sorry. I came to help but couldn’t do anything.”

“It’s alright. Just holding the dark sorcerer back for a moment was enough. Given that the three of you were temporarily incapacitated, he must have been strong as well.”

It felt like he was gilding his own face, but Asel said it with a nonchalant expression. It could be seen as brazen.

“Indeed.”

However, the professors’ expressions were serious. Those who had been affected by despair murmured, recalling the sensations they had felt at that time.

“He was using a combination of dark magic and shadow spells. It was a method of magic I had never heard of before. He seems to be close to a high priest; if left unchecked, he will likely reach the 8th tier in the future.”

“...The fact that he used dark magic itself means he has Imagery. If such a mage reaches the 8th tier...”

“He temporarily incapacitated me even while being at the 7th tier. If he reaches the level of an archmage, it might be irreversible.”

Fernan looked around seriously, speaking to everyone.

“It seems we should propose to put him on the hunt list.”

“...What?”

Asel was taken aback by the more intense reaction than he had expected.

“Was it that serious?”

“Absolutely. You’ll understand once you experience it. He seemed to have talent similar to yours.”

“...”

It wasn’t similar; it was the same.

“If left alone, a monster of Girzen’s level will be born. Back then, I was slow to judge and let Girzen go, but this time it’s different. We need to act as quickly as possible and eliminate him.”

“Since he is fundamentally a mage, it would be best to discuss it with the alliance. I’ll use the contact person from the Magic Tower to reach out. If he’s a mage affiliated with the Ignis Magic Tower, they’ll pay close attention as well.”

“That sounds good. Please take care of it.”

“Sure. It’s no trouble.”

While Asel remained silent, the conversation progressed rapidly. At that moment, Isaac, who had sheathed his greatsword, turned to Asel and asked.

“By the way, Asel. Do you know where the academy’s female student who was captured is? I think we should find her first.”

“...I think I have a rough idea. Follow me—”

Just as Asel was about to answer, having composed himself.

“Ah, Benefactor!”

From the half-collapsed cave entrance, a girl with blue hair peeked her head out. With bloodshot eyes streaming with tears, she ran toward Asel.

“Thank you for saving me, Benefactor!”

“...Uh, uh. Sure.”

The sudden appearance of the girl caused the professors’ faces to stiffen slightly. Asel reassured them before patting Aleph’s back as she nestled into his arms.

He whispered softly.

“What’s with the tears? You were supposed to collapse here.”

“I couldn’t help but cry because I forced my eyes to stay open. This is acting. Watch and learn.”

“This isn’t acting; it’s foolishness, isn’t it? And do something about your facial muscles. It looks too awkward.”

“I did my best.”

“Ahem.”

Isaac shot a glance at the two whispering. Asel quickly composed his expression and ruffled Aleph’s hair.

"This is the girl I was talking about. It seems she escaped in the chaos when the cave collapsed."

"......I see. But as far as I know, there wasn't a student who looked like this at the academy."

"I'm not an academy student."

Aleph took over Isaac's words.

"I was just passing by when demon worshippers kidnapped me. My benefactor tried to help me, but we got separated."

"Is that so? What's your name?"

"Aleph. I don't have a last name. I don't have a family either."

"Hmm......"

Isaac narrowed his eyes, looking at Aleph with suspicion. Aleph met his gaze with tears streaming down her face, then buried her face in Asel's chest and whined.

"Scary face. I don't like it."

"......Well, well. She seems to be doing quite well for someone who was captured by demon worshippers."

Isaac let out a hollow laugh and shook his head, and Cyrus spoke with a cigar in his mouth.

"Stop it, Isaac. She's a child who was captured by a Sorcerer. It wouldn't be strange if she was a little out of it."

"Ugh...... That's true. Still, she needs to be examined by the Order. Something strange might have been implanted in her head."

"Understood."

Aleph mumbled, still burying her face in Asel's arms. Asel pushed her away, as if subtly sniffing her, and sighed deeply, gathering the remaining electricity in the space.

"Will you be returning now?"

"Return first. You can't be late for class. And Asel, you'll need to testify about what happened today later, so be prepared in advance. The incident happened near the academy, so we're going to try to keep it as quiet as possible, but we're not going to bury it completely. We also need to send a message to the lord of the territory."

"Understood. I'm aware."

"Good. Then now—"Sorceress!"!!"

Just as Isaac was cleaning up the surroundings, and some were about to say they should collect the items in the cave, even the corpses.

KWA-AAAAANG!!!

A giant ice fox fell vertically from the sky, scattering cold air around it. Everyone's face hardened at the familiar Mana, and Friede, who was riding on the fox, came down to the ground and burst into anger.

"Dare to forcibly transfer me in the direction of the academy? You son of a bitch, I'll kill you for sure!"

"......"

"Where did he go, Sorcerer! Fernand! Did you see where that Sorcerer of yours went?"

Fernand replied with a bitter smile to Friede, who asked with blue eyes.

"He ran away, Dean. You're too late."

"What."

"I'm glad you don't seem to be hurt. More importantly, we'll be returning soon. Turn around."

"Wh-what."

"Alright, one person go back first as an escort for Asel and that girl! The rest of us will collect the evidence and artifacts here! And dozens of corpses!"

The professors divide their roles according to Fernand's words.

The situation seems to be over already.

"......Eek!"

Friede stared at them blankly, then looked at Asel, who approached her, and her eyes welled up with tears.

'I'm sorry, Dean......'

Asel apologized to her in her heart and bowed her head deeply.

The guilt was no joke.

Illustration rough draft. As I mentioned last time, I've only released the colored rough draft first.

Author's Note

Thank you!

# 134 - Final Exam

The morning of the day after dealing with various tasks, the first class began.

“Yawn…”

Asel let out a yawn and looked down at the exam paper on his desk.

Fatigue weighed heavily on his entire body. Even though he had reached the 7th tier and somewhat transcended the limits of his physical body, the lack of sleep still gnawed at his mind.

If he had trained his body, the situation might have been a bit better, but unfortunately, Asel was fundamentally a magician. Relying solely on his computational ability and mental strength, he was bound to feel the effects of sleep deprivation more acutely.

‘It’s a relief that most of today’s class is theoretical.’

Otherwise, he might not have been able to perform even half as well as usual.

With the end of the semester fast approaching, most classes were directly tied to grades. Even theoretical classes often had pop quizzes or written exams, and practical classes were graded at every moment. Because of this, students sensitive about their grades were fiercely striving to achieve high scores.

Asel was no exception.

He had long since received high scores in practical classes. The same went for theoretical classes. Thanks to his good memory, Asel vividly remembered the problems the professors had said would appear on the exams. Even unannounced pop quizzes posed no problem for him.

He had learned the material long ago from Ena. While combat studies and common subjects relied purely on memorization, the Magical Department exams posed no challenge for Asel. It was sufficient to recall what he had learned from Ena, and calculating the formulas was easy.

‘At this rate, becoming the top student this time should be no problem.’

Although the final exam, which accounted for the largest portion of the grades, was still ahead, Asel wasn’t particularly worried about it.

Doing what he had done so far would likely be enough.

He didn’t know the content of the final exam, but there was no need to be overly anxious.

‘Easy.’

As he solved the problems written on the exam paper, he quickly organized his thoughts. He had reached a level where he could solve commonly known magical computation problems without deep thought. Even if he thought about other things while solving the problems, he wouldn’t get any answers wrong.

‘Aleph is temporarily taking responsibility for the dean, so there’s no need to worry. I just need to handle the testimony about the demon worshippers well.’

He was confident in his acting skills, but if the academy introduced a lie detector, things could get a bit tricky. While Asel could potentially deceive the device with his mana manipulation skills, getting caught would complicate matters. Especially if a clergyman was accompanying him.

He doubted they would go that far, but it was wise to prepare just in case.

Perhaps the divine power embedded in his mana would lend him a hand.

It had been a long time since impurities had entered his mana, but he still hadn’t figured out what role the divine power played.

Now, the divine power had melted away to the point where he didn’t feel discomfort anymore. Rationally speaking, it would be right to consider it already a part of his mana.

‘It doesn’t seem like there’s been a change in ability. It would be best to consult a mana expert for an accurate diagnosis, but there are no such technicians within the academy grounds.’

Mana was fundamentally an innate hetero ability. Cases of acquiring it later in life were extremely rare, and even including both innate and acquired individuals, the number of mana awakeners was less than a hundred. Naturally, with such a small sample size, the number of experts who had studied mana for a long time was also limited.

Those who possessed mana and had survived long enough to study it.

As far as Asel knew, there was only one such person in the empire. Even that person rarely ventured out of the capital. Being affiliated with the imperial palace made it impossible to meet for personal matters.

‘It can’t be helped. I’ll have to figure it out on my own, even if it takes time.’

He wouldn’t refuse help if it were offered, but if there were no opportunities, he had no choice but to strive alone.

Asel finished his thoughts and stood up with the completed exam paper in hand.

“I’m done.”

He handed the exam paper to the professor standing at the podium. The professor received the paper with a dazed expression, glanced at the clock, and said in a somewhat bewildered voice.

“...It’s only been 10 minutes since the exam started?”

“Is that so?”

“Are you really done? Did you just guess through it...?”

“I’m done. You don’t need to worry.”

Asel smiled and tucked the quill he had been holding into his pocket. The professor quickly skimmed through the exam paper Asel had brought, and upon confirming that most of the answers were correct, he wore a wry smile.

“Checked. You can go.”

“Thank you. Take care.”

“Yeah.”

After bowing his head slightly to the professor, Asel left the examination room.

As he glanced back, he caught sight of Elena and Celine, who were still working on their exams. Celine, belonging to the Magic Tower, seemed to be solving the problems quickly, but Elena, who relied on her senses to use her hetero ability, appeared to be struggling a bit.

She was usually quite lackadaisical in class. Asel couldn’t help but chuckle as he completely exited the examination room.

“Second period... is it the history of magic? It’ll probably be a written exam again.”

Stretching his arms, he strolled down the academy corridor. It was still during class hours. Excluding the students who had a free first period, everyone else was attending classes, so there weren’t many people inside the main building of the academy.

The remaining students were also busy racking their brains in preparation for pop quizzes. Asel was the only one appearing relaxed.

“Phew…”

He exited the Magical Department building and entered a shared building.

A place for joint classes or studying common subjects unrelated to departments. It was also equipped with various facilities, making it a sufficient place to spend some time.

With a little time left before the second period started, it wouldn’t be bad to shake off some fatigue in the lounge.

Asel thought so and headed down to the basement of the building. On the way, he stopped by a café set up by the academy and ordered a cup of coffee, moving on while admiring the various posters hanging on the walls.

“...Hmm?”

At that moment, Asel caught sight of a familiar girl’s back.

She was a head shorter than others, with blonde hair and short legs. Yet, the weapon she held was a fearsome noblewoman’s battle axe.

“Hmmm.”

Ellen Hargelin. She was standing in front of the bulletin board, staring blankly at the postings. Asel placed his arm on her head and spoke.

“What are you doing here, Ellen?”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s you.”

Ellen, who had been looking at the bulletin board with a serious expression, smiled slightly and looked up at Asel.

“Why are you here at this time? Did you skip class?”

“Of course not. I just finished the exam quickly and came out. What about you?”

“I don’t have a first period today. It’s the only one of the week.”

“Ah…”

“I came here to kill time until the second period starts. I couldn’t find anywhere else to be.”

“That’s true.”

Asel nodded and turned his head toward the posting Ellen had been checking.

“So, what were you looking at?”

“As you can see.”

Ellen brushed Asel’s hand off her head and replied.

“It’s the group members for the final exam.”

“...Hmm.”

Just as Ellen said, in the center of the bulletin board, a large posting displayed the list of group members for the final exam. Asel stared at the section with the names of the first-year students and let out a small sigh.

While it was the same as the first group project in that they would work in groups, there were only two members per group. It could practically be considered a two-person project.

The content of the final exam was not specified. They might notify later, but it seemed they had announced the groups first.

“I heard the selection of group members was random.”

“...How could they randomly select for an exam?”

“I’m not sure either. But there’s something important.”

Ellen grinned and pointed to the bottom of the posting, where her name was written.

“It means I’m really lucky.”

Next to her name, two characters were clearly written.

[Ellen Hargelin, Asel.] - Group 61.

Asel let out a small laugh upon confirming the familiar names, and Ellen smiled while tapping the enormous battle axe on her back with her finger.

“I’m not worried about losing.”

Asel secretly agreed with her words.

The group members for the final exam were announced on a grand scale. Since the exam content changed every year, even the upperclassmen couldn’t guess what it would be, but just looking at the assigned group members, it was possible to roughly predict the results.

“I’m on the same team as the top student! Yay!”

“Ah, damn. Both of us are in the lower tier. What were they thinking when they formed these groups? If we fail again, it’ll be a big deal!”

Those paired with upper-tier students cheered, while groups composed solely of lower-tier students groaned.

It was only natural. After all, the most important thing in academy life was grades. Therefore, it was inevitable to react sensitively to the exam that had the greatest impact on grades. This was also why they desired to be paired with upper-tier students.

“...Ah.”

However, there was one group composed entirely of upper-tier students that did not celebrate.

[Elena von Valdemia, Grace Bydel.] - Group 15.

The second-best student of the Magical Department and the top student of the Knight Department.

One of the strongest groups composed of a high-ranking vampire and the youngest Aura expert. Although the exam content was still unknown, it was a combination that all first-year students considered a winning candidate.

Yet, as the two people looking at the same bulletin board confirmed each other’s faces, they frowned and spoke.

“...Ugh, it’s annoying. I feel like there’s a strange smell coming from somewhere.”

“...Tsk. It’s itchy being around mosquitoes in the summer.”

Their conversation dripped with blatant hostility and malice.

The cold tone made the students nearby shiver, and everyone broke into a cold sweat as they glanced at the two.

Just as the bloodlust and aura were about to spill from their bodies.

“Do you know absolutely nothing about the exam content?”

“Nothing. I asked my sister, but she said she didn’t know either.”

“...Why does it feel so awkward hearing you call her ‘sister’?”

“What do you mean by that?”

At that moment, Ellen and Asel came up the stairs leading down. The two, who had seemed on the verge of fighting just a moment ago, smiled as soon as they saw Asel and approached him with lively steps.

“Asel, where have you been? We were looking for you!”

“Good morning, Asel. Did you sleep well?”

The fierce demeanor they had just shown vanished, and the students looked on with expressions of shock at the bright faces of the two.

“Those crazy girls.”

Someone muttered absentmindedly.

Though they didn’t respond, most agreed with that sentiment.

# 135 - Final Exam (2)

The incident investigation was swift and discreet.

This was possible because the academy didn't want to escalate the matter. If innocent victims had emerged or the situation had blown up, they would have had to go public and issue a statement, but fortunately, the incident concluded without much noise.

Some professors cast suspicious glances at the appearance of an unidentified woman named Aleph, but most simply overlooked it.

It was a world teeming with demon worshippers, outlaws, and all sorts of monsters. People without connections were constantly being born, and it wasn't uncommon for orphaned children to kill others.

It was something you wouldn't easily realize if you stayed in the city. No matter how powerful the empire was, just outside the borders, you could find the disabled and people treated worse than livestock scattered about. In policies for the people, they were endlessly weak and marginalized.

It was a bleak world. That was why the power of religion was so immense. Once you'd fallen to the bottom, the only thing to believe in was God.

Even inviting a clergyman who didn't possess Sorcery Power to a prayer meeting required a large sum of money. If they had awakened Sorcery Power, they were worth whatever you were willing to pay.

The clergyman before Asel was such a person.

An old man in holy robes. A priest and servant of God who possessed Sorcery Power.

"You, magician."

He placed his hand on Asel's head as she sat in the chair and closed his eyes.

"Do you swear in the name of God that there is not a single lie in what you have just said?"

"I swear."

Asel replied in a flat tone. The clergyman stood still for a moment, then smiled warmly and withdrew his hand.

"All is truth. There is no room for doubt."

"That's a relief."

Asel smiled back and stood up.

They were in a church owned by the clergy on the academy grounds. In the center, with the academy professors as witnesses, she had just finished the verification.

It wasn't something the academy had pushed for.

The academy had planned to complete the cross-verification on their own without involving a clergyman, but the clergy desperately requested to attend, so they had no choice but to arrange the meeting.

It wasn't hard to understand, as the clergy wanted to handle anything related to demons perfectly. The fact that the atmosphere wasn't too hostile was all thanks to that.

Friede seemed worried that Asel might feel uncomfortable, but Asel didn't mind at all.

'Even if it's a lie detector using Sorcery Power, as long as I block the path through which the Sorcery Power enters, there's no problem.'

Asel was loved by Mana, not by God. Naturally, she would be more ignorant than the clergyman about the flow and operation of Sorcery Power.

Still, with her experience in manipulating Mana, it wasn't too difficult to infer the flow of Sorcery Power.

She traced the wave that started from the clergyman's hand and blocked the path to her brain. Instead of forcibly grabbing and twisting it, she guided it to dissipate naturally, ensuring that not even a seed of suspicion would arise.

It was a difficult task, but not entirely impossible.

Sorcery Power was basically a power that was put into the body and activated. It was different when using it like a Formula, but healing others or interfering with the brain inevitably had to be expressed through the body.

The same was true now. Thanks to this, Asel was able to escape the clergy's interrogation without any particular suspicion.

"Thank you for your trouble, clergyman."

"Not at all. I am grateful that you responded to our sudden call. More importantly, would you like to have a meal before you go? We have prepared a banquet."

The clergyman suggested with a benevolent smile. Asel hesitated for a moment, pretending to think, then smiled wryly.

"I'm sorry. I always have dinner with my teacher."

"Ah, I see. It seems you have a close relationship with your master."

"Yes, that's right. Well, it was an honor to meet you. I'll be on my way now."

"Yes. May God bless you."

Asel and the clergyman shook hands with smiles. Asel left the church with the professors who had attended as witnesses, glancing at the setting sun.

Friede, who had been casting recognition interference magic beside her, opened her mouth.

"Well done. Though there wasn't really anything to be caught for in the first place."

"…That's true."

Asel nodded with a wry smile.

Nothing to be caught for? If she had made even a slight mistake, Asel would have been immediately dragged away by the Inquisitors. Then the situation would have become a bit tricky.

She might even have been referred to a religious trial. Just imagining it was horrifying.

"How is Aleph?"

Asel changed the subject, rubbing her stiff wrist. Friede stopped walking as if thinking for a moment, then opened her mouth with a subtle expression.

"I've confirmed that there's nothing wrong with her head or body. She's also been verified by the clergy. However, it seems she suffered a great mental shock during the kidnapping, and her mental state is a bit strange."

"…"

"It's like she has a lot of knowledge, but doesn't really know common sense. Well, anyway, that's how it is. Since she said she doesn't have any family, I'm keeping her with me for now."

"Is that so."

"She said she wants to meet you soon. I'm willing to allow a meeting if you're okay with it, but what do you think? Is it alright?"

"I have no problem with it."

Asel chuckled and turned to Friede.

"If you want, I can take care of her."

"Hmm. That won't do. You shouldn't do that unless you want to be scorched by Ena."

"…"

"She's weaker than me now, but that venomous girl will find her power someday. It's best not to create situations you can't handle."

Asel opened her mouth to refute Friede's confident words, but closed it again because she couldn't think of anything to say. Thinking about it calmly, Friede's words were absolutely correct.

"Anyway, I'll allow meetings, but not cohabitation. Above all, I'm going to look for her family first. She says she doesn't have any, but there's a possibility of amnesia. I'll have to inquire for at least a few months."

"…"

"If I still can't find them… I'll have to consider enrolling her as a freshman next year. She seems to have a talent for magic."

Her Mana purity is about the same level as yours.

Friede added with a faint smile. Asel responded vaguely and looked up at the sky.

A sky filled with sunset. The time of twilight when the sun sets and the moon shyly reveals itself.

"…"

Even with various incidents, time continues to flow.

There's not much left of the first semester. The final exams will mark the start of the vacation.

There are a lot of things to do during the vacation. It would be better to prioritize them in advance.

'I think it would be good to visit the cliff first and then go to Valdemia. I'll do magic research in between.'

She organized her thoughts and moved her feet. Time moved alongside her.

And so.

The day of the final exams dawned.

\*\*\*

On the first day of the final exams, following a schedule consisting solely of written tests, Asel quickly finished the written tests and prepared for the next day. The scores were, of course, perfect.

The second day. This time, the written and practical exams were mixed.

The written exam proceeded similarly to the previous day. The practical exam simply involved hitting a target with magic and scoring based on the degree of destruction.

The first in line was Celine. She dropped a large star, completely shattering the upper part of the target. The lower part was slightly left, but that alone was enough to get a high score.

"Celine, 97 points."

The examiner spat out in a dry voice, restoring the target. Celine turned to Asel, who was next in line, and smiled brightly.

"Hehet!"

An innocent smile. Asel smiled back at her as she walked towards the back of the test site, and dropped lightning on the restored target without any warning.

KWA-AAAAAANG!!!!

A deafening roar shook the test site. The huge wind pressure scattered everyone's clothes and hair, and nothing remained on the spot where the eerie dark blue light had fallen.

The examiner scored with a sullen expression on the target that had disappeared as if it had never existed.

"…100 points. The next person, wait a moment. I'll bring a new target."

"…Ah, shit."

The student assigned to be next after Asel cursed. The examiner did not stop him and smiled bitterly inwardly, as it was understandable.

Thus, the second day of the exam ended.

Finally, the most important third day dawned. It was also the last day of the exam.

Unlike before, the last day of the exam was not held on the academy grounds.

It was held further up. In a forest beyond a mountain range not managed by the academy.

A forest with few monsters and mostly wild animals. It wasn't difficult to walk around, but it wasn't easy either.

Unlike the mountain range, this place was one of the places specially managed by the academy. Every year, they called in earth mages to change the structure and put effort into using it as a test site.

Of course, it was not usually open to the public. As a result, no one had ever set foot here.

Asel was the same. She stood at the entrance to the dense forest, waiting for the examiners to finish their preparations.

"…"

Being like this reminded her of the entrance exam. She remembered gathering people in front of the forest like this back then.

That was already a few months ago. Thinking about it, time seemed to pass so quickly.

Just as Asel was gazing at the forest with melancholic eyes.

"You were here."

Ellen approached from behind her. Asel turned to her and smiled softly.

"You came?"

"Yeah. I was a little late because I was working on my weapon, but fortunately, it seems I'm not late. That's a relief."

"You should have done it in advance. Look at me. I came early."

"I don't want to hear that from the person who came to the entrance exam the latest."

Ellen chuckled and stood next to Asel. Asel mixed Freezing Magic and Wind Magic slightly to create a cold breeze. Ellen, who was sweating, smiled pleasantly at the cool breeze.

"Thank you."

"No problem. More importantly, your outfit is simpler than usual?"

"The dress code is free for this exam. I decided it would be better to come like this than to wear something dangling around."

Ellen's outfit consisted only of a simple shirt and leather pants. It certainly looked easier to move around in.

Indeed, for Ellen, who used a huge battle axe as her main weapon, it was important to have clothes that were easy to move in. Just the fact that she was wearing pants instead of the skirt she usually wore showed how serious she was about the exam.

Asel glanced at the huge double-edged axe on her back and opened her mouth.

"Of course, your goal is first place?"

"Why are you even asking?"

Ellen smiled, lightly punching Asel's chest with her fist.

"There's no reason not to aim for first place when you're my partner. We're going to smash everything. I'll protect you from the front, so feel free to go wild."

The moment she said that.

"Ah, everyone, focus."

The examiner, who had been talking among themselves, finally opened his mouth.

"We will now begin the final exam."

He confirmed that everyone's attention was focused on him, then continued in a serious voice.

"The name of the exam is 'Hunting'. It's a unique exam that is divided into prey teams and hunter teams. I'll explain the rules, so listen carefully."

"…"

"Everyone gathered here is on the prey team. The hunters will start the exam on the opposite side from where you start. Also, they will be deployed tomorrow."

"…So that means."

One of the students frowned and opened his mouth, and the examiner chuckled and took out a bracelet from his pocket.

"That's right. The prey starts a day earlier."

"…"

"I'll explain the reason now."

The examiner put on the bracelet and continued.

# 136 - Final Exam (3)

“First, everyone put on the bracelets. Those using Aura should receive them from Professor Isaac, and those using Mana should get them from Professor Mari.”

Following the examiner's words, the students split into two groups. Asel returned to his spot after putting on the bracelet handed to him by Mari.

“Did everyone receive theirs? Good. Then I will now explain the rules regarding the bracelets and the exam.”

“......”

“The rules are simple. As I mentioned, this exam is a competition where student groups are divided into hunters and prey. Everyone here is part of the prey group. However, there are grades within the prey as well.”

The examiner held up four bracelets, fixing them in the air for everyone to see.

“There are a total of four grades for prey, from level 0 to level 3. You can think of them as prey and predators. Level 0 consists of simple insects, while level 3 includes beasts like bears or lions. Something like that.”

“......Hmm.”

“And if you are at a higher level, you can hunt the lower-level students instead of the hunters. This means that a level 1 can hunt level 0, and a level 2 can hunt both level 1 and level 0. Only those at level 2 and above can engage in direct combat with hunters.”

“......”

So, being a hunter doesn’t guarantee safety from the prey.

Well, in actual hunting, there are often cases where predators get eaten themselves, so it’s not particularly strange.

“Some might wonder if there’s really a need for the same prey to fight each other. To be honest, that’s a valid point. There’s no real need for it. However, whether you’re prey or a hunter, if you successfully ambush another group, you can increase your level. And when your level increases, the amount of Mana you can use also rises.”

“......The amount of Mana you can use?”

“Those who are quick-witted or sensitive to their senses have probably already figured it out.”

The examiner smiled while tapping the floating bracelet with his finger.

“This bracelet not only contains the teleportation formula you used during the entrance exam, but it is also designed to store Aura and Mana. The amount of energy you can store varies by level. Level 0 has the least, and level 3 has the most.”

“......”

“If you exhaust all the energy stored in the bracelet, you will no longer be able to use Aura or magic. Naturally, that would be disadvantageous in both combat and daily life, so you should manage it well.”

“I have a question.”

A male student wearing glasses raised his hand and asked.

“I understand that a higher-level group can rise by defeating a lower-level group. But what about those at level 0? There’s no lower level, right?”

“You can still rise by fighting within the same level.”

“Ah.”

“Do you understand well enough now?”

The examiner smiled and snapped his fingers. At that moment, everyone’s bracelets lit up, and Ellen grabbed Asel’s collar, swallowing hard.

“Both prey and hunters can only ambush other groups twice a day, in the morning and evening. So think carefully before you act. Each level will be assigned based on performance as soon as the exam begins. The top students will go down, and the lower ones will go up.”

“......”

“Those at level 3 can hunt lower levels to increase their energy storage without limit. Keep this in mind, and be careful not to provoke the golems that are opposing the hunters scattered throughout the forest. If you want to score high, I won’t stop you.”

Vroom!!

The light from the bracelet intensified. Asel realized that he and Ellen were about to be teleported somewhere in the forest and couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Remember, everything that happens during the exam is being graded. Cheating will get you disqualified the moment you’re caught, so don’t even dream about it. And finally, I hope everyone achieves results proportional to their efforts during the week of the exam.”

The examiner clapped his hands with a smile.

“Then, let’s begin.”

The moment he spoke.

Shwaaaah...!!!

The bracelet was instantly bathed in light, and Asel’s vision flickered briefly. When he opened his eyes again, he saw dense foliage and trees.

“Did the teleportation succeed?”

During the entrance ceremony, Asel had refused to use the formula to avoid being teleported to a coordinate. But since he had to act with Ellen this time, he didn’t resist and let himself be transported. Thanks to that, the formula worked flawlessly.

“Ugh, as expected, teleportation magic doesn’t sit well with me...”

Ellen, who was holding onto Asel’s collar, bent slightly at the waist and rubbed her stomach. Asel placed his hand on her head and withdrew the Mana that was causing her nausea.

“......Hmm? I suddenly feel better. What did you do?”

“There’s always a way. By the way, you seem to be very sensitive to Mana. If you can feel nausea from just a little residual Mana...”

“I’m not sure, but that seems to be the case. I’ve always felt nauseous whenever I experienced magic directly since I was young.”

Among those who awaken Aura, a very small number react extremely sensitively to Mana. This is a symptom caused by the strong nature of Aura rejecting the Mana that enters the body. It’s not dangerous, but it has the critical drawback of not being able to enjoy the convenience of magic.

Still, given the exceptional nature of Aura, the potential is outstanding. Ellen is probably the same.

There’s no doubt when you see that she has reached the level of an expert at such a young age. Asel chuckled and ruffled Ellen’s hair, then glanced around.

He couldn’t find anything particularly distinctive. All he could see were grass and trees.

It wasn’t the best starting point, but it wasn’t the worst either. He was grateful that they hadn’t landed in an open field or a place inhabited by monsters.

“I can hear water flowing nearby. It seems there’s a cave as well. I can hear the sound of wind.”

“......Did you enhance your hearing with Aura?”

“Hmm.”

Ellen nodded proudly. Asel sighed and turned his head toward where she was pointing with her finger.

“Then let’s go check it out. Since we’ll be staying here for a week, it’s best to find a water source in advance.”

“Isn’t it possible to extract water with magic? I think I saw that during the entrance exam.”

“Since the amount of Mana we can use is limited, it might not be feasible.”

Asel looked down at the bracelet.

The bracelet was entirely painted black. A single number floated faintly above it.

[0]

This was probably the level of prey that the examiner had mentioned.

After hearing that higher-ranking students would go down, he had made some guesses.

He thought it was the right thing to do for fairness. If higher-ranking students were placed at the top predator position from the start, the exam itself would flow unilaterally.

‘The amount of Mana I can store is... absurdly low.’

The storage space was less than one-tenth of the Mana he usually possessed. There was no way he could use Electrification Art, and even using mid-level elemental magic would quickly deplete the remarkably small amount of Mana, making Asel click his tongue.

‘It would be impossible to maintain a Shield constantly. The rate at which the stored Mana decreases is visibly fast.’

Normally, the Shield showed such low Mana consumption that he wouldn’t have to worry about it, but that wasn’t the case now. If he didn’t use it to deflect enemy attacks whenever necessary, the stored Mana would disappear in no time.

For the sake of combat, it was wise to minimize Mana waste. Surely, no group would recklessly hunt on the first day, so he could efficiently use Life Magic only when establishing a base.

To do that, the priority was to find the cave along the waterway. Asel organized his thoughts and turned to Ellen with a faint smile.

“Let’s consume Mana and Aura as efficiently as possible, and rely on our physical abilities for the rest. We have no choice until we raise our levels.”

“Hmm. I think you’re right. Understood. I’ll stop using Aura for now.”

Ellen nodded and withdrew all the Aura that had been enhancing her body.

In the first place, Ellen didn’t need to be overly fixated on enhancing her body through Aura due to her unique strength as a Hargelin. It was a pity that she couldn’t enhance her senses, but she wouldn’t lack in strength. If she set her mind to it, she could uproot trees and swing them around with her bare hands.

Though small in stature, Ellen possessed a strength that was disproportionately large. She would probably be able to wield an axe just fine.

The problem was Asel. Although he ran every morning with Elena, he still lacked stamina. To survive purely in the forest without using magic, he would need to put in much more effort than Ellen.

It wasn’t a major concern. Asel had already lived in slums and barns. It wouldn’t be anything new to live in the forest now.

“Let’s go. Before the hunters arrive, let’s find a suitable cave to use as a base.”

“Got it. I’ll take the lead. I remember where the sound of the wind was coming from.”

“Then I’ll leave it to you.”

Asel smiled as he patted Ellen’s shoulder. Ellen, with the axe slung over her shoulder, wore a confident expression.

Crunch, crunch.

They moved forward, stepping on the grass. Swatting away flying insects and splitting a charging wild boar in half.

It was more akin to smashing than cutting. Ellen dragged a portion of the split boar’s carcass along as she continued her steps.

Before long, the riverbank came into view.

A clear stream flowed steadily along the riverbank. While it wasn’t very deep or wide, it was sufficient for drawing drinking water.

“Hmm...”

Asel briefly surrounded his hand with Mana to check if it was safe to drink the river water, then filled Ellen’s water bottle.

He had only brought a small amount of jerky, so he had to use Ellen’s bottle.

She blushed slightly, looking a bit embarrassed, but didn’t refuse Asel’s use. After sharing a brief moment of saliva, the two of them headed toward the cave.

-Grrr...

A bear lived inside the cave.

-Grrr...

It used to live there. Now it was gone.

Asel placed the firewood he had brought at the entrance of the cave and started a small fire for their use. Ellen cut the bear carcass into manageable pieces and scattered the rest far from the cave.

This was a method to prevent intrusions into the cave and create a spot to continuously hunt animals.

With this, they had a way to obtain both drinking water and food. It wasn’t perfect, but it would serve as a temporary solution.

Ellen nodded in satisfaction and returned to the cave.

“Oh, you’re back.”

Asel welcomed her while setting up basic defensive magic in the cave. Ellen’s eyes sparkled as she saw Asel casting the spell himself for the first time.

“I thought you wouldn’t know the proper methods since you always spam magic with the shadowless spear, but this is unexpected.”

“To use the shadowless spear, you need to know the basics first. Sit tight for a moment. I plan to use up all my Mana today to set up the base.”

“Aren’t you preparing for combat?”

“Once the magic is complete, there won’t be any need for combat today. It will perfectly defend against external intrusions.”

“You’re quite confident.”

“Isn’t it only natural since it’s my magic?”

Asel chuckled and looked back at Ellen.

“Or do you doubt it?”

“Of course not.”

Ellen smiled and leaned against the wall.

“If I were to doubt your magic, I’d have to doubt every magician in this world.”

“Thank you.”

Asel replied, and Ellen set her axe down beside her.

Before long, the defensive magic was fully completed. It was a strange form of magic that prevented outsiders from seeing inside and could only be entered by reversing the spell.

With this, they could safely spend the day. Asel created a blue magic lamp inside the cave with a satisfied expression.

The softly glowing blue light illuminated the dark cave. After staring blankly at the campfire for a moment, Ellen turned her head toward Asel.

“Is it all done?”

“Yeah. Let’s eat something soon.”

“I’ll prepare it. This time, you can rest.”

“There’s no need for that.”

“I want to do it. Personally, I’ve recently developed an interest in cooking.”

Ellen scratched her cheek, slightly blushing.

“When we get married later, I should know how to cook, right?”

“......”

“I’m a girl after all...”

“......”

“......Say something. It’s embarrassing.”

Ellen stood up and playfully punched Asel in the chest.

Asel smiled wryly and ruffled Ellen’s hair.

Ellen didn’t refuse his gesture.

# 137 - Final Exam (4)

The barrier magic was perfect, and there was plenty of drinking water and food, so Ellen and Asel spent their time inside the cave without bothering to go outside.

Then, just before evening, Ellen, who still had plenty of Aura left, went outside for reconnaissance and brought back a large amount of leaves.

It was to make a makeshift bed. After gathering the leaves in one place and shaping them like a giant bundle of straw, Asel used Life magic on top of it to add comfort.

"Oh..."

Ellen lay down on the bed and exclaimed. Despite being a bed made of leaves, it felt similar to the ones used in inns.

There was a reason why people hired a Life mage for long-distance travel. With them, the quality of camping itself improved dramatically, so even if they weren't helpful in combat, they were worth hiring.

Ellen, who had often participated in Labyrinth expeditions, knew that fact well. But Asel's magic was far superior to the Life mages she had experienced.

"Where did you learn this kind of magic? Was it self-taught?"

"There's a master of Life magic in Wiheim named Hailey. I learned it from her."

Asel chuckled and sat on the bed.

"She's probably the best Life mage alive. Although she doesn't really think of herself as a mage."

"That's strange. In a world where those who can't even use magic properly swagger around as mages."

"There are guys like that?"

"Many."

Ellen clicked her tongue and continued.

"There are plenty of wandering mages or mercenaries in this industry who have just entered the path of a mage and think, 'I'm superior,' 'I'm fundamentally different from you,' and so on... That's why mages belonging to the Magic Tower or specific organizations are so highly valued."

"...You must have suffered a lot."

"It can't be helped. Mages themselves are very rare. Even if you don't like it, you have to cater to them. It's only natural to reduce casualties."

High-ranking warriors can perform absurd miracles such as splitting mountains or seas alone, but those who have just entered the Aura stage cannot. Rather, they are much weaker in terms of firepower than mages of the same rank.

Of course, if they were to duel with a mage, they would undoubtedly win, but the battle with monsters was a different story, wasn't it?

Since they weren't going to duel with them, the existence of mages was essential to deal with monsters on a large scale.

The problem was that the lower the mage's rank, the more arrogance reached its peak.

They were literally frogs in a well. Arrogance stemming from not knowing how wide the world was, how many types of magic there were, and how versatile it could be. A group of human scum that made you wonder if something was lacking in them as people.

The higher the rank, the more exponentially the value increased, and the lower the rank, the more they were trash who demanded high prices despite their lack of skill.

It was perhaps only natural that the perception of mages was shattered.

Asel smiled bitterly and took a bite of the bear meat skewer that Ellen had grilled. Ellen, who seemed to be thirsty from talking, took a sip of water and opened her mouth.

"There's another Labyrinth exploration scheduled for this vacation. But I don't think the family has hired a mage yet. The season inside the Labyrinth has changed to winter, so we need a Flame Sorcerer, but all the skilled mages are stuck in the Magic Tower and won't come out... Haa."

"Hmm..."

Asel pondered for a moment at Ellen's lament, then put down the skewer and said.

"How about I go?"

"...What?"

"I was thinking of going to the cliff I carved out for personal reasons. Instead of getting a proper fee, I'd like you to guide me to the cliff."

"R-Really? Is that all you want?"

Ellen jumped up from her seat and asked. Asel smiled faintly and nodded.

"It's not like I'm desperate for money. If you add the transfer of ownership of some of the artifacts from the Labyrinth exploration to me, I'll give you proper firepower support. How about it?"

"I-I'll ask the head of the family. It's not that I'm refusing! I personally want you to participate, but this isn't something I can decide on my own! I'll send a letter as soon as the exam is over!"

"Okay, I hope for a good result."

Asel smiled, and Ellen calculated in her head.

Asel hadn't forgotten the mock Labyrinth that remained in the academy.

A bizarre place with all sorts of variables. If she visited the original Labyrinth, it would be much easier to conquer the mock Labyrinth.

'Even if the real Labyrinth has more academic value, my priority is the mock Labyrinth first. I can't help it since it's connected to the Sage and the Devil of Possibility.'

She wasn't mistaken. Just because the current situation was relaxed didn't mean she was free from the Devil's gaze. Now that she realized the Devil of Possibility was pulling the strings, she couldn't let her guard down.

Conquering the mock Labyrinth might be what Nom was aiming for, but she couldn't just do nothing. Nothing would change by staying still.

"..."

It wasn't a problem that needed immediate consideration. Asel put her distractions aside and lay down on the bed.

Time was already passing evening. The sun had long set, and the moon was shining its full form, illuminating the ground.

It was right to go to sleep now in order to be active quickly tomorrow morning.

"Let's go to sleep soon. We don't need to stand guard. I've set up an alarm in case of an intrusion attempt."

"...Okay. I'll go to sleep."

Ellen nodded and unbuttoned a few buttons on her shirt. Then, she lay down on the bed like Asel.

"Good night, Asel."

"Yeah, you too."

The two looked at each other and smiled, then closed their eyes. Before long, soft breathing spread inside the cave.

-…Chirp.

And so, morning dawned.

"The exam begins. Hunter Team, commence deployment."

At the same time as the examiner spoke, everyone's bracelets lit up and they teleported to the forest. Elena and Grace, who had been standing far apart, opened their eyes in the same place, and the two looked at each other and clicked their tongues.

"Go somewhere else. Don't let me see you."

"I guess you don't care if your exam score is shattered?"

"...What?"

Grace frowned and asked back. Elena tied her hair back tightly and glared at her.

"Did you take the entrance exam lying down? Of course, there are plenty of examiners in this forest, and if the same team members don't act together, the score will be greatly reduced."

"I don't care."

"I do. I'm going to take the top spot and stand side by side with Asel."

Elena glared down at Grace with crimson eyes.

"So, if you don't want to be with me, just give up on your own. Who do you think wants to be with you?"

"...Hoo."

Grace closed her eyes tightly and exhaled a long breath.

"...Fine. I'll cooperate this time only. I don't want to lose the top spot either."

"I don't like the way you say it like you're forced to. Do you know you're incredibly unlucky?"

"Please, just talk to Asel in that tone. Instead of sticking to him like a bitch in heat every day."

"Hmph, do you think I don't know you're subtly rubbing your vulgar breasts against Asel's arm? Aren't you the one who's more in heat?"

"Tsk, I guess all the nutrients went to your breasts and thighs. You talk so vulgarly. You have no class."

"Did your height drop? You're just a small thing chattering away. Lead the way."

"Damn mosquito bitch."

"You're just an ignorant woman who only knows how to swing a sword."

"You haven't even kissed yet."

"Have you ever exchanged bodily fluids? It's ecstatic, you know?"

"Yeah, I've done it a lot. Many times more than you."

"Did you have a dream or something? How pathetic."

The moment the two were snarling at each other, a golem suddenly popped out of the bushes. Grace still glared at Elena and drew her sword.

Swish!

The blade filled with Aura accurately split the golem, core and all. Stone dust and dirt fell in a shower, and Grace sheathed her sword and clicked her tongue.

"You would have been eliminated if it wasn't for me just now. Understand?"

"I'm speechless."

Elena let out a hollow laugh and spewed out bloodlust to the side. The flowing blood was shaped into a giant greatsword and flew into the bushes.

Kwaaaang!!!

A golem hiding there was smashed to pieces with a huge explosion. Elena smiled as she watched the core being crushed and the golem turning into sand.

"So, did I save you this time?"

"...I knew it too."

"So what."

"...You..."

Elena pressed down on Grace's head. Grace reflexively swung her sword at her arm.

"Ugh!"

Elena, who didn't expect her to actually attack, turned her arm into blood to avoid the attack.

"What are you doing, you crazy bitch!"

"You were going to avoid it anyway. You wouldn't have been able to avoid it if I had attacked seriously."

"So you attack me anyway? Are you really so desperate to die?"

"Your tone changed again. Is that how you lived in the duchy? Do you have multiple personalities or something?"

"...Haa."

Elena sighed deeply and stroked her long ears.

"Let's just finish the exam quickly. Let's defeat all the golems and finish in first place."

"That's what I should be saying. I don't like breathing the same air as you."

"Who do you think likes it? I want to drink Asel's blood soon. Saliva or anything else is fine too."

"...Are you really trying to make me angry? Should we just fight it out here? If you're a vampire with regeneration, you won't die even if you lose an arm or a leg."

"I don't care. I'll deliberately delay the regeneration and run to Asel and tell him you cut it off."

"...Ah, this is really pissing me off."

Grace sighed and covered her face with her hands.

"Why did a mosquito suddenly get hooked on Asel..."

"I want to ask you that instead. Why do you like Asel?"

"You wouldn't understand even if I told you."

"Playing the pitiful heroine?"

"Think what you want."

Leaving behind the sneering Elena, Grace lowered her sword.

"Let's go. We'll hunt as much as possible and get the highest score possible. It's a temporary alliance for that."

"You support. I'm the main."

"Get lost. I'm the main. What are you weaker than me at?"

"No way? And I'm stronger, right?"

"Bullshit."

"Yeah, you're more bullshit."

"Ugh, how vulgar. Why don't you use those swear words in front of Asel?"

"Yeah, you started it first."

"That 'yeah yeah.' Can't you talk without it?"

"Yeah, so what."

"You goddamn bitch."

"Yeah- Aagh! Don't grab my hair! Let go!"

"You let go first! Let go before I tear it all out!"

Elena and Grace grab each other's hair and struggle.

'...What are they doing?'

A professor hiding his presence in a tree frowned as he watched the two.

# 138 - Final Exam (5)

Just after dawn, Asel went down to the riverbank and filled his half-empty water bottle.

The Mana in his empty bracelet was now full. It seemed that from the moment he first wore the bracelet, it had the characteristic of absorbing the wearer's energy on its own.

He could have resisted, but it didn't seem to align with the purpose of the test, so he stopped. Unless there was a sudden attack from an external force, there was no need to use more power than what was embedded in the bracelet.

“Phew…”

He exhaled deeply and wiped the moisture from his mouth. Closing the water bottle, he hung it at his waist and slowly got to his feet.

“Hmm?”

At that moment, someone appeared on the opposite bank of the river.

A wizard with a cigarette in his mouth was about to light the tip with a lighter. He briefly made eye contact with Asel, then immediately spat the cigarette out and waved the lighter in his hand.

Whoosh!!

The flame that erupted from the lighter intensified according to his will. The fire shaped itself like a shield, blocking Asel's path, and through the haze, he looked at Asel and spoke.

“Surrender!”

“...You have quite the skill with fire, don't you? Are you from the Magic Tower?”

“No! I just learned this from my master, who is a Flame Sorcerer! I can't use magic properly without an external spark!”

“That sounds like a limitation. Usually, when that happens, the power of the magic becomes stronger than usual when the conditions are met.”

Asel chuckled softly and slowly raised his Mana.

“You've learned a unique form of magic. It seems you have a good master.”

“...I'm glad you think so, but how about we just pretend we didn't see each other? I really don't want to fight you.”

“Sorry, but this test is quite important for me too.”

“...”

“I couldn't take the midterm, so I want to score high on the final with my own strength. I don't think I can just walk away.”

“...Ah, damn it.”

The Flame Sorcerer muttered under his breath and ruffled his hair roughly.

“Why did I have to run into this guy right as the test started...?”

“Are you at Stage 0?”

“Yeah. I came out to smoke and check if there were any people by the river. And right at the start, I run into a beast. I feel really sorry for my group.”

“...Hmm.”

“Fine. Even if I leave, let me smoke one cigarette. Just that much should be allowed.”

Instead of answering, Asel narrowed his eyes. The Flame Sorcerer confirmed the meaning behind that action and forced a smile.

“Not working, damn it. Berta!”

As he shouted, an arrow flew swiftly from the bushes. Asel immediately caught the arrow with Telekinesis and shot it back.

“Crazy!”

The arrow, slicing through the wind, accelerated with the support of Asel's telekinesis. It grazed part of the Flame Sorcerer's shield, and Berta, avoiding the arrow, bit her lip and rolled on the ground.

Her appearance was revealed. Asel relaxed his stiff wrist, having never seen her face in the Magical Department classes.

“So that was the plan from the start. One person scouts ahead, while the other waits for the right moment to support... Not a bad strategy.”

“You're saying that after blatantly trampling over us!”

Berta manipulated the large bow she was holding and split it into two swords. Then she stood protectively in front of the Flame Sorcerer.

“How much Mana do you have left, Alberto?”

“...Half. I used it all to create the shield.”

“How foolish! They haven't even attacked, and you're already scared!”

“You don't understand! That wizard could kill us with just a gesture! I personally admire him!”

“What are you—”

“I think I've given you enough time.”

Ignoring the two who were arguing, Asel activated his magic.

“Let's meet again in the second semester.”

Boom!

A massive explosion erupted at his feet.

As he lit the flame of the lighter and entered the cave, Elena, who had just finished washing her face, looked up at him.

“You're later than I expected. Did something happen?”

“I ran into another group. I dealt with them all.”

Clack.

Asel closed the lighter and contemplated the remaining Mana in his bracelet.

Scale Formula. A unique type of magic classified as a peculiar spell that can amplify magic through song or instruments. To understand its basics, one must also be familiar with magic that is activated simply through sound.

What Asel used was the most representative basic magic of the Scale Formula. A wide-area spell that amplifies sound and sweeps the surroundings with waves.

Its efficiency was quite high, so the power was significantly greater than the Mana consumed. Thanks to that, the remaining Mana in the bracelet was sufficient.

With this, the next battle should be fine. Asel nodded and handed the water bottle to Elena.

“Take a sip. It’ll help wake you up.”

“I’m already awake, but thanks. By the way, are you okay? No injuries?”

“None. And maybe because I dealt with a group, we leveled up to Stage 1. Check it out.”

“Hmm, really. It feels like the amount of Aura contained has increased a bit. With this, we can use Aura for hunting animals.”

Elena said that with a satisfied expression, then opened her mouth in a somewhat awkward tone.

“Sorry. I should have been more helpful in the battle.”

“It’s fine. Who knew what would show up? By the way, what about food? Is everything ready?”

“I was just about to start. We only have grilled meat, but I’ll do my best to cook it nicely.”

“Okay, I’ll leave it to you.”

Asel smiled and ruffled Elena's hair. With a determined expression, Elena tied her hair back tightly and brought firewood over to the remaining embers of the campfire.

Whoosh!!

The fire began to blaze again, and appropriately sized pieces of meat were skewered and placed over it. Before long, oil dripped down, and Elena took out the perfectly cooked meat and handed it to Asel.

“Eat up. It should taste good.”

“Thanks.”

Asel and Elena had clearly divided their roles. Asel was responsible for fetching water and scouting in the morning, while Elena took care of preparing meals and exploration. It was a result of each utilizing their strengths.

Although it was the first day of execution, the harvest was not bad. By chance, he had also brought the lighter, and thanks to the efficient use of detection magic, he had a good grasp of how many people were around.

He would have to see what stages they were at, but for now, this was enough. All that remained was to hunt them down.

The problem was that the morning hunt had already ended. Even if he knew their location, he wouldn't be able to charge in and take them down until evening. Until then, there was no choice but to deal with the golems.

“If I exhaust my Mana and Aura dealing with the golems, that would be a problem in itself. I might run into another group along the way, and I might not be able to go for a proper hunt in the evening.”

“If only there were no Mana restrictions, I wouldn’t have to worry about such issues.”

“It can’t be helped. If it weren’t for this, honestly, you would have swept everything by yourself. Wouldn’t it be easy to win just by dropping lightning from the sky?”

“...I can’t argue with that.”

Asel stood up with a wry smile.

Due to the Mana restrictions, the current situation made it impossible to use Electrification Art. It was safe to say that magic with immense firepower was completely sealed. High-level spells aside, even casting low-level spells a few times would quickly drain his Mana.

So, lightning was out of the question. Even if it resonated with nature, just creating a small spark would deplete his Mana.

‘Elemental magic can still be used efficiently if the environment is right.’

Water Flow Magic becomes stronger and more efficient where there is a water source. The same goes for other elemental spells. The Earth Spell boasts extreme efficiency among elemental spells for a reason.

The problem is that Earth Spells have very few offensive spells, making them not very suitable for combat.

Improvising improvements would be fine, but there was no need to go that far for the test. There was no time for that.

So, what magic should he focus on for this test?

Asel pondered for a moment and thought of the lighter he had tucked away. He pulled it out with sparkling eyes and ignited the flame.

“...Hmm.”

The blazing flame. A device that continuously consumes the embedded Mana through the ignition magic contained within.

“This should work.”

Asel grinned and stretched the flame he held in his hand. Watching the fire extend like a sword, he nodded in satisfaction, and Elena let out a chuckle.

“...You don’t have to show off your confidence in Flame Spells; I was already planning to take you along.”

“Not like that.”

Whoosh!!

The fiercely rising flames writhed according to Asel's gestures and will.

The fire that had transformed into a sword soon twisted like a bow, and Asel detached a portion of the flames and shaped it into an arrow.

The amount of Mana consumed in that process was minimal.

Thanks to Asel's Uniqueness of Affinity and Domination resonating not only with the spells inside the lighter but also with the medium of fire itself.

With this, the test would be no problem. Asel grinned as he covered the lighter.

At the same time, the flames disappeared. Elena looked up at him with a puzzled expression, and Asel, putting on the school uniform coat he had taken off, spoke.

“Let’s go, to catch the golems.”

“...Didn’t you just say that hunting golems was ambiguous?”

“The situation has changed. I found a breakthrough.”

“Hmm... if you say so...”

Elena, slightly skeptical, raised her axe, trusting Asel's words.

“Let’s go. I’ll take the front, so feel free to go wild.”

“Okay. I trust you. Don’t worry about the firepower.”

“I’m not worried.”

Elena smiled and playfully punched Asel in the chest.

“Whose magic is it anyway?”

On the evening of the second day of the test.

Elena and Grace, who had knocked out the hidden participants and taken over their hideout, sat in front of the campfire, quietly exhaling.

Though it was summer, the nights were still chilly. In the city, it might not matter, but in the woods, the night air didn’t carry the humid warmth. Thanks to that, even with a campfire, it was pleasantly cool rather than hot.

“...Hey.”

As they were passing the time, Grace looked at Elena and spoke. Elena rolled her eyes and stared at Grace.

“What?”

“I just had a sudden thought. Even if we fight like this, will anything really change?”

“...That’s a sudden thought.”

Elena sucked on a blood pack she had placed nearby and glanced at Grace with blood-red pupils.

“So? Are we supposed to be friends now?”

“Are you crazy? Why would I want to be friends with you? Of course, if you declare that you’re giving up on Asel, I might consider being friends.”

“Get lost. A vampire only loves once in their life. And to bear fruit, they’ll do anything.”

“I know. I was just hinting that I don’t want to be friends.”

“Annoying.”

“You’re more... Ugh, no, that’s not the point.”

Grace wrapped her red hair around her fingers and continued.

“While we’re fighting, don’t you think Asel’s master, Ena, is making progress? You know how much she likes Asel.”

“...I know.”

Elena’s gaze became serious. Grace looked at the blazing campfire with her dark eyes.

“Maybe we’re already falling behind. Since we’re always together, she probably had more opportunities than we did.”

“...”

“So I think instead of fighting among ourselves, we should keep an eye on her.”

“...Huh.”

Elena exhaled deeply and stared at Grace.

“You’re saying that, but you’re going to keep an eye on her too.”

“...Why are you so perceptive?”

“...It’s annoying. What are you really trying to do?”

Elena muttered with a frown, and just as Grace was about to pull out a grilled fish from the fire with a smirk,

Boom!!!!

“...!”

“What, what is that...?”

A massive explosion echoed nearby. At the same time, acrid smoke and flames began to spread in all directions. The two immediately got up from their seats and ran toward the source of the sound.

When they arrived at the location.

“Elen, activate their bracelets and let’s head back. I adjusted the firepower, but it was way too loud.”

“Got it. Are we going to recover the spreading fire?”

“Of course. We can’t just let the forest burn down... Huh?”

On the hillside of the forest, Asel, looking down at the two unconscious students, snapped the lighter shut and turned his head as he felt Grace and Elena's gazes on him.

The three pairs of eyes met.

“...”

“...”

“...”

A moment of silence passed.

“Uh... hello.”

Asel awkwardly waved at the two.

# 139 - Conclusion

“…….”

The blazing flames consume the underbrush and trees.

It is a fire imbued with Mana. A flame that is practically impossible to extinguish by conventional means. The fire, which only obeys Asel's control, spreads in all directions as if dancing.

Though it was night, the surroundings became as bright as day. The scarlet flames illuminated the world, revealing Elena and Grace's faces beyond the haze. Asel opened the cover of the lighter and contemplated the remaining Mana in his bracelet.

‘About half left.’

He had hunted a few golems and flamboyantly scattered flames, instantly killing another group. Even so, there was still half of the Mana left in the bracelet.

Thanks to the lighter. As long as he could directly draw out external sparks, there was no need to worry about Mana when handling lower-level magic.

It would be difficult with mid-level magic or higher, but that was not a concern at the moment. To be honest, this exam was sufficient with just one lower-level spell.

The exception applied only to the two people in front of him. Asel, with a wry smile, whispered to Ellen, who had approached nearby.

“I’m going to escape. Since we’ve already used up our hunting quota, there’s no need to fight.”

“Understood. What’s the escape route?”

“Up.”

Asel said while wrapping flames around Ellen's axe blade.

“Wait for the right timing and jump up. Then I’ll add propulsion through magic.”

“……Is it safe?”

“Even if it’s dangerous, I’m the one in danger. So don’t worry.”

“Now that you say that, I’m even more worried.”

“Hey, you two. What are you whispering about?”

Grace stepped forward, interrupting their conversation.

“More importantly, we’re too close together.”

“……Grace.”

“Shall we start with a conversation? How’s the exam going? Any injuries? Living in the forest isn’t easy, is it? Is there anything uncomfortable?”

“Let’s save this conversation for after the exam.”

Asel smiled wryly and ignited the lighter.

“Because I’m the type to keep business and pleasure separate.”

“……I know that too. But it seems she doesn’t.”

Grace glanced at Elena, who looked as if she didn’t understand why Grace was raising her fighting spirit.

Ordinary people understand in their heads that they should distinguish between business and pleasure. However, when the situation arises, they often struggle to come up with a quick answer and end up hesitating.

Elena was like that.

The fixed roles of hunter and prey. The grades are clearly divided based on how faithfully those roles are executed. Personal relationships are pushed aside, and one must rely solely on the predetermined roles in this survival-of-the-fittest exam.

Most people cannot do this. The memories of laughing and chatting together prevent them from swinging a real sword. The reason Elena couldn’t immediately muster a fighting spirit when looking at Asel and Ellen was rooted in this thought.

But Asel and Grace were different.

Asel with the rationality of a mage.

Grace with the years gained through her regression.

For mages, the distinction between business and pleasure was as important as life itself. Even if they belonged to the same Magic Tower, the moment they received a request and belonged to a completely different faction, they became no different from enemies. When that moment comes, the one who hesitates due to personal feelings is the one who loses.

For a regressor, betrayal was as natural as air. In a world where demons run rampant and demon worshippers swarm like insects, no one sang songs of dreams and hope. Everyone stabbed each other in the back, and Grace had dozens of scars on her back.

The current situation wasn’t as serious as the example given. After all, it was just a simple academy exam, wasn’t it? But the feelings the two harbored were not so different from a real situation.

They were going all out.

Grace and Asel exchanged smiles as they looked at each other.

“Speaking of which, haven’t we ever truly sparred with each other?”

Asel said, rubbing his neck with his hand. The sound of the lighter cover closing and opening echoed softly beyond the noise of the roaring flames. Grace stepped toward him with a smiling face.

“Asel. I may look like this, but I’ve been living off my sword for decades. You shouldn’t underestimate me.”

“Hmm. I apologize.”

Asel continued as he wrapped the Mana thread around the lighter.

“You’re not very threatening.”

Whoosh!!

He held onto the thread and swung it horizontally as if wielding a heavy weapon. At the same time, the flame that blossomed at the end of the lighter grew in size, transforming into a massive fireball that shot toward Grace's head.

“Ah!”

The overwhelming heat felt as it drew closer. Grace, with a cheerful smile, thrust her blade into the air.

The blade pierced in the opposite direction of the incoming fireball.

At that moment, the blade vibrated, and the very fabric of space began to warp.

Creeeek……!!!

A noise erupted as if space itself was misaligned, and the trajectory of the incoming fireball twisted, rushing back toward Asel.

He didn’t panic and simply wrapped his hand around the fireball, tilting his head.

“Is this the Bydel family’s Space sword? It operates in a completely different manner than Space spells. The effects seem similar, though.”

“After all, it’s swordsmanship, not magic.”

“Can we still call swordsmanship that handles space, swordsmanship?”

Asel threw the fireball he held into the air.

“It seems closer to Authority or Hetero ability.”

[Red Cloud Fire Rain]

Fwoosh!!!!

The rising sphere spread wide, forming a massive red cloud.

Thud thud thud thud!!!

From within that cloud, flames fell like rain. Grace immediately twisted her sword, creating a distortion in space based on her perspective.

“Yikes!!”

Only then did Elena quickly grasp the situation and stick close to Grace. Grace dodged her as if swatting away a mosquito, but Elena, undeterred, displayed a dazzling maneuver.

“Protect me too!”

“I’ll protect you, so do something! Act like a mage from the Magical Department!”

“Blood flow shaping!!”

As Elena shouted, a massive Blood glaive erupted from her grasp, charging toward Asel. Despite knowing the incoming attack, Asel chose not to react.

Because there was someone who would react for him.

“Not a chance.”

Clang!!

Ellen, with flames wrapped around her axe blade, crushed the blood thorns and set them ablaze. She elegantly twirled her axe and slung the spear over her shoulder.

“Not a single hair will touch our mage. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Thank you, knight. Just keep protecting me and don’t step into the magic range.”

“Of course, mage.”

Ellen smiled and aimed her axe blade at the two.

“I’ll show you the wildness unique to the Hargelin family.”

“……It’s really too close.”

Grace muttered quietly as she released a blade of energy toward the sky.

Swish!!

The red blade tore through the clouds, forcibly cutting off the magic.

An attack that sweeps through space itself. Beyond simply cutting magic, it disrupts the space where the magic exists. Since the place where the formula must be maintained is literally twisted, the magic inevitably shatters and scatters.

It’s not a big problem. Asel quickly retrieved the remnants of the shattered formula, opened the lighter, and formed a hand sign with one hand.

[Fuse]

Following the principles of Lightning Flash, the magic that Asel created directly manifested. A whip of flames flew through the air, gnawing at Grace's Barrier Field.

Kakakakak!!!

The sound echoed as if a blade was scraping a metal plate. Just before Grace’s Barrier was destroyed, she slid across the ground toward Asel and thrust her blade toward his shoulder.

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

Naturally, it was blocked by Ellen’s axe. With a clang, the two were bounced back, and a bloodthirsty wolf charged between them.

Two wolves rushed at Asel, ready to bite his neck. Ellen used the recoil from being bounced back to drive her spear deep into the ground, spinning around and launching herself at the wolves.

Boom!!

One of the wolves exploded under her swinging leg. The constricted pupils scattered light in search of the next prey. Covered in blood, she grabbed the remaining wolf's jaws with both hands and tore them apart in the opposite direction.

-Crack!

The wolf, split in two at the mouth, fell to the ground in a pool of blood. Ellen stepped on the blood puddle and exhaled deeply.

The excitement of battle added strength to her contracted muscles. The wildness and strength unique to the Hargelin family allowed her small frame to exhibit superhuman abilities even without Aura.

It was a threatening sight, hard to believe that Ellen was usually calm. Asel smiled and pulled out the double-edged axe embedded in the ground, handing it to Ellen.

“Let’s get going, Ellen. How much Aura do you have left?”

“Enough. Just give me the signal, and I’ll jump right away.”

“Good.”

Asel refined the flames that moved according to his gestures.

[Building Fire Into Flame]

[Striking Red]

The shapeless, distorted flames took the form of a massive cannon. A Flame Spell that uses all remaining Mana. The flames, capable of obliterating bones upon direct hit, were aimed precisely at Grace and Elena.

“……Haha.”

Grace chuckled nervously as she stared at the blazing cannon.

“If I get hit, I’m done for.”

“You’re not planning to get hit, are you?”

Asel grinned and wiped the beads of sweat from his forehead.

Sizzle!!!

The ground, unable to withstand the heat of the cannon, began to melt.

All the flames that burned the forest converged into the cannon’s muzzle. In an instant, the extinguished wildfire formed a projectile inside the cannon, illuminating the entire forest as if a small sun had risen.

[Fortification Spell]

[Flame Cannon]

[Single Point Ignition]

Boom!!!!

The fortification spell, using flames as a medium, formed the Flame Cannon. The Flame Spell, used as a projectile, trembled unsteadily, as if it could explode at any moment.

Creeeek…….

The cannon turned. The pressure exerted by the massive cannon was intense enough to be felt by the students remaining in the forest.

There was no need to think about who was there. The magic was at a level where Elena’s expression turned pale, and Grace smiled wryly as she relaxed her shoulders.

“It’s not complete yet, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

As she said this, she wiped the expression off her face.

“Mindscape Manifestation.”

“……What?”

At the sudden declaration, Asel’s face stiffened slightly.

Boom!

A heavy wave swept through the space. As if pushing the very air away, Asel’s magic briefly wavered.

Just as he regained his senses, a sweet floral scent brushed against the tip of Asel’s nose.

“……This is.”

In a space that had only grass, small flowers bloomed profusely.

The most prominent were the Fiann flowers, forget-me-nots, and black roses. Various other colored flowers adorned the ground.

“……”

Mindscape Manifestation, allowed only to the great archmage and Aura masters. The power of erosion that unravels one’s own thoughts and world into the outside.

Though not perfect, Grace had succeeded in releasing part of it into the world. The implications of this were enormous.

“……Grace, you.”

“I haven’t reached mastery yet. But the mindscape has long been completed, for reasons you know.”

“……”

Regression. The mindscape completed in the previous cycle. Once established, it becomes a milestone and proof that cannot be changed by any means.

“It’s not perfect yet, but it’s possible to release part of it. The ability of the mindscape is……”

“Erosion of space and time.”

Asel interrupted Grace’s words, muttering.

“The flow of space and time has changed abnormally based on the area where the flowers bloom. For an ordinary person, it wouldn’t be strange to experience confusion in memory and distortion in the body.”

“……That’s right.”

“What an absurd ability. What kind of thoughts and ideals must one have to produce such a mindscape?”

Asel looked down at the petals burning at his feet.

The petals blooming in all directions were still revealing their forms, but around Asel, there were no petals left. They had all burned away, unable to withstand the overwhelming heat emanating from his body and the cannon.

Thanks to that, Asel was relatively free from Grace’s mindscape. The same went for Ellen, who stood beside him.

However, this was a workaround made possible because Grace had not yet reached mastery. If this were entirely her domain, the flowers would not burn or be destroyed but would continue to bloom, twisting space and time.

It was a power that was absurd to even imagine.

To manipulate space and time at will. That was something only possible after mastering time spells and space spells to their extremes. Yet, this was achieved by a swordsman who couldn’t even use basic magic.

“……”

The reason was somewhat understandable. Perhaps it was possible because she was not an ordinary swordsman but a being that defied the flow of time.

‘But even if I think that, questions remain. If the mindscape was completed in the previous cycle, it must have been when she hadn’t even regressed yet. How could she have developed the ability to interfere with space and time?’

……Perhaps the previous cycle is not the starting point of regression.

She had experienced regression before, and if it was simply that she didn’t remember, then perhaps she lost all memories of the cycles except for the previous one for some reason.

“Asel.”

Ellen lightly tapped Asel’s shoulder, pulling him from his reverie. Only then did Asel turn to her.

“Let’s think later. For now, let’s move as planned. We can’t afford to waste any more time.”

“……Right. You’re right.”

Asel shook off his thoughts and smiled brightly.

There would be more opportunities to ask about Grace’s mindscape later. For now, dealing with the current situation was the priority.

“Count to exactly ten from now, then jump into the sky with all your strength.”

Instead of answering, Ellen nodded.

She immediately packed all the Aura remaining in her legs. Asel turned his gaze back to Grace, whose face was pale.

“It seems you’re still lacking in capability. Struggling to maintain it for just a few seconds.”

“It can’t be helped. But I’m not far from mastery.”

“That’s good news.”

Asel smiled and snapped the lighter cover shut.

“By the time we visit the World Tree, I’ll be a master.”

“Whoosh!”

As she exhaled, Ellen inhaled deeply, wrapping her arms around Asel’s waist and leaping into the sky.

Boom!!

The two soared into the air with a tremendous sound. Grace, who hadn’t expected them to fly into the sky, frowned, and Elena immediately summoned a pair of spears, aiming them at the two.

“But unfortunately, this exam will end in disqualification!”

Asel shouted as he aimed the cannon to the side.

“You should have only used the Aura contained in the bracelet!”

Immediately afterward, the projectile was fired.

———!!

The red fireball shot into the sky, painting it crimson.

In an instant, everyone’s gaze turned skyward at the flash of light.

Boom!!!

With the massive pressure and firepower, propelled by the recoil, Asel and Ellen quickly flew in the opposite direction of the projectile. The two vanished from sight in an instant, leaving Grace and Elena with blank expressions.

At that moment, a supervisor, who had been watching the situation nearby, appeared and said,

“Grace Bydel, disqualified. Reason: Exceeding the allowed use of Aura.”

“……Ah.”