# 150 - Maze (2)

The exploration team advanced along the open road. The residents of the territory scattered flowers, and Lute greeted them with a smile. Asel, still clumsy at horseback riding, cast a spell on himself while watching the scene.

The gates of the castle walls opened, and the exploration team completely exited the territory. Glancing back, the grand castle walls he had seen from the air were now dampened by the rain, appearing dull and lifeless.

“......”

There was an inexplicable sense of foreboding in the sight. Ellen seemed to welcome the weather, but Asel personally did not share that sentiment.

It was probably due to the difference in their childhood experiences.

Unlike Ellen, who could stay in the mansion even on rainy days, Asel had to struggle to avoid hypothermia. If he fell ill, he would have to prepare for death, and he had to help Evelyn carry water to prevent flooding in their shelter.

Looking back now, he wondered how he had managed to live like that. If he were to return with those memories, he would probably struggle to adapt and flounder.

Suddenly, he thought about how remarkable Grace's mental strength was. Despite experiencing a return that would break most people's spirits, she maintained a bright demeanor...

‘Does she possess some independent means to keep her mental strength intact? It wouldn’t hurt to ask her about it once the vacation is over.’

Even as he continued his thoughts, the exploration team moved forward. The wizards raised their Mana to keep the supplies dry in the pouring rain, while the knights maintained their vigilance.

There were not many bandits around the mountains near the Hargelin territory. Thanks to periodic hunts, they were kept in check. That said, they weren’t completely absent; even so, they weren’t foolish enough to ambush a group filled with knights and mercenaries.

As a result, the road to the Labyrinth was quite pleasant. It would have been perfect if the weather were nice, but even so, it was decent enough.

“Break time!”

About five hours after the exploration team set off, they stopped in the plains to rest with their horses. Asel climbed onto the wagon for a moment to look down from a higher vantage point.

“Master, here are some fruits.”

“Oh, thank you.”

He bit into a crisp apple that Aleph handed him while activating a detection spell. Although the knights were maintaining their vigilance, it wouldn’t hurt to be cautious.

Ten minutes into the detection.

Nothing was particularly amiss. Just a few beasts at most. Asel briefly watched the mercenaries dismantle a rabbit they had caught before looking up at the overcast sky.

“Wizard!”

At that moment, a young knight approached Asel and shouted.

“Could you please start a fire? The rain is making it hard for us to light one!”

“Hey, hey! You crazy girl!”

Before Asel could respond, a knight who appeared to be her senior rushed over and covered her mouth with his hand. He then bowed repeatedly toward Asel.

“I’m sorry! This girl is from the countryside and has never met a wizard directly before! If she has been rude, I apologize on her behalf!”

“Mmph! Mmmph! Mmmph!!!”

The knight struggled to free herself, but her senior ignored her and remained bowed until Asel forgave her. Asel looked down at them for a moment, then chuckled and snapped his fingers.

Whoosh!!

At that moment, a bright red flame ignited on the wet firewood that the knights and mercenaries had brought to start a fire.

The spark created by magic blazed fiercely, unaffected by the pouring rain. Asel watched the flickering lights from all around and spoke to the knight.

“You don’t need to scold her too much. I understand completely.”

“Th-thank you!”

“Ugh! Phew! Thank you so much!”

With that, the two knights returned to their original positions. Upon closer inspection, they belonged to the unit led by Ellen. Since they were tasked with escorting the wizards, they would likely encounter each other frequently within the Labyrinth.

The roaring flames remained lit throughout their break. Thanks to that, the rabbit the mercenaries had cut up was roasted over the campfire, and some of it was handed to Asel. Although he wasn’t particularly hungry, he accepted the meat out of courtesy and shared it with Aleph.

“Break time’s over! We’re moving out!”

Not long after, Lute shouted, filled with Aura. Asel quickly extinguished the flames, and those who had been riding mounted their horses again. There was no need to erase the traces of their break, so the group set off without delay.

The pouring rain intensified, and the sound of it grew louder. The raindrops were now so large that they felt like hail, pounding against their bodies.

“Damn it, my clothes are getting heavy.”

“There’s water filling my boots too. It’s going to be hard to move properly in a fight like this.”

From the other side, he could hear the mercenaries grumbling. Fortunately, Asel and Aleph were able to repel some of the rainwater with waterproof magic. A few wizards who had learned the Water Flow Spell were also continuously casting spells on their bodies and belongings.

Still, aside from the rainwater, there were no other restrictions on their movement.

Just as he was thinking that, a shout came from the front.

“An anomaly has appeared ahead! All units prepare for battle!!!”

The voice, filled with Aura, sent chills down his spine, and every nerve in his body stood on edge.

He activated the detection spell while mounted.

Only one presence was detected.

* Grrroooaaarrr!!

A massive monster roared from its mouth located on its head. Its vertically split jaw stretched down to its waist, exposing its internal organs. A single eye above its heart squirmed, attached to a tentacle.

“It’s a memory eater.”

Aleph explained from beside him.

“It has the ability to erase all memories of the physically consumed target from everyone’s mind. Quite a powerful Authority.”

“It’s a creature from the Labyrinth, isn’t it?”

“Yes. The moment such a thing is released into the wild, that country is finished.”

As Aleph said, it was an ability far too strong for mere monsters to possess. It was a power that only creatures from the Labyrinth, born of demonic blood, could have. If such a thing roamed around like other monsters, everyone’s minds would have been full of holes by now.

“Still, it’s faster than I expected to encounter one. I knew the Labyrinth periodically expelled anomalies, but I thought we had a considerable distance left.”

The distance between Hargelin and the Labyrinth wasn’t too far, but it wasn’t incredibly close either. While he wasn’t surprised that the Labyrinth had begun to expel anomalies, encountering one here was indeed unexpected.

Of course, that didn’t change what needed to be done. Asel loosened his wrist and extended his fingers toward the sky.

At that moment.

Boom!!!

With a tremendous roar, the upper half of the anomaly was blown away. Rainwater mixed with blood fell in a shower. Lute, who had thrust his spear, swept his hair back with a flourish.

“Situation resolved. Keep moving.”

“......That was absurdly quick.”

Aleph muttered, and Asel canceled the spell he had been about to cast with a wry smile.

“Still, I have faith in him.”

Lute’s skill was at the Expert level, just below Master. For a wizard, it was equivalent to a high-level 7th tier.

A skilled 7th tier spellcaster could sometimes defeat an unstable 8th tier grand wizard. Lute would likely be capable of something similar.

While it was a shame he wasn’t an Aura master, his skill was still impressive enough not to be overshadowed anywhere. It was more than sufficient to represent an exploration team.

Perhaps some of the mercenaries who had just witnessed that strike had begun to trust him.

In any case, there was nothing bad about it.

Asel followed the group as they resumed their journey. The anomalies they encountered along the way were all slaughtered without needing to lift a finger.

Thanks to Lute and the knights of the Hargelin family, who were doing their part. The mercenaries were also holding their own, finding their places in the fray. Even in environments where wizards were needed, the other wizards were managing things well enough without Asel’s involvement.

Thus began a comfortable yet slightly uncomfortable march, and after about three days, they finally arrived at the Labyrinth after hunting anomalies following Asel’s detection magic.

Lute turned to everyone right in front of the entrance to the Labyrinth and shouted loudly.

“We will begin the entry tomorrow morning! Until then, everyone should rest! Dismissed!”

Following his command, both knights and mercenaries began to set up tents and rest. Asel quickly dismantled his tent with magic and stood at the entrance of the Labyrinth, looking down.

The entrance to the Labyrinth was not much different from a simple cave.

An open pit, not a cave or stairs. A dark abyss where the bottom was not visible.

“......”

The depth was unfathomable. It was hard to believe that one could safely land after falling. If those who had not awakened their Mana fell, their bodies would likely burst upon impact.

There was a reason why only mercenaries who could handle Mana were hired from Hargelin. Not only did they need to endure the fall, which was a prerequisite for entering the Labyrinth, but they also needed Mana to withstand the magical pressure within.

“......Huh.”

Many would likely lose their lives here.

While no one had come expecting death, it was arrogant to hope that no casualties would emerge from the Labyrinth. They would do their best, but there would undoubtedly be those who would be discarded like dust.

Perhaps that could be Asel.

Anything could happen in the Labyrinth.

It goes without saying, but he had no intention of dying here. There were still many things to discover, many responsibilities to uphold. There were many things he wanted to do and desires he wished to fulfill.

It might sound selfish, but Asel was determined to survive by any means necessary. He wouldn’t force others to sacrifice, but if someone had to be sacrificed...

Then...

“Master. It’s time for dinner.”

“......Okay.”

His thoughts had wandered for too long. Asel turned with a wry smile.

Yes, the best outcome would be to create a situation where no one had to sacrifice themselves.

“Let’s go.”

Asel had the ability to make that happen.

# 151 - Maze (3)

“…….”

After a very long time.

Truly, after hundreds of years, the man opened his eyes.

……drip.

From his body, pierced by countless branches, blood and black fluid were flowing out. He had transcended physical death by shedding his humanity, yet pain still existed.

Perhaps it was because he had taken countless lives to rise. Or maybe it was the gears of a faintly remaining conscience grinding against his flesh.

Either way, it was a welcome fact for the man. He had never forgotten the weight of the lives pressing down on his back and shoulders.

“……You have awakened.”

The landscape that greeted him upon opening his eyes was a pure white canvas. Although the blood flowing from his body added color, it was insufficient to stain this vast space.

From the moment he first arrived here until now.

This place had always been pure white and empty.

And the being guarding this place had always been the same.

“How do you feel?”

“…….”

A colossal tree that seemed to be made up of dozens of connected apartments. The owner of the branches that pierced the man's body, the World Tree, spoke to him in the form of an elf. The man gazed at her with an expressionless face and opened his mouth.

[It’s the worst.]

The resonance of frequency through Mana.

His vocal cords could no longer perform their function. It was partly due to the branches of the World Tree piercing through his throat, but more so because they had been rotting away from prolonged exposure to demonic poison.

If it weren't for the World Tree's help, his throat would have decayed, and his head would be rolling on the floor. Perhaps because of this, the man held a rather favorable sentiment towards the World Tree.

Whether the World Tree felt the same, he wasn't sure.

[One gear has begun to turn.]

The silent man lifted his head towards the sky and spoke.

Creak.

With that trivial movement, the space tore, shattered, crumpled, and restored in a cycle. The branches that pierced through his body rotted into powder and then became strong branches again, devouring his flesh.

“……Don’t move. I’m the one in pain.”

[Are you feeling sympathy for the demon?]

“I know you’re different from ordinary demons. If you weren’t, we wouldn’t have cooperated in the first place.”

[…….]

“What gear was turning?”

[The knight.]

The man replied with a weary expression.

[The most noble knight.]

“…….”

[The forgotten hero sleeping in the Labyrinth.]

“……You mean the apostle of the demon.”

[That could be said as well.]

The man lowered his head again, and the World Tree spoke with a serious expression.

“The demon of the deep sea has only recently recognized your existence.”

[I know.]

“……As you well know, Leviathan is quite a strong demon. It’s fortunate that its followers are weak; otherwise, it would have already dominated the seas. Can we afford to leave such a being unchecked?”

[I don’t care.]

“……What did you say?”

[Leviathan was a good child.]

Rarely, the man let out a voice tinged with a hint of laughter.

[And Leviathan has a different true name. I named it to mean the first child I created.]

“……What is it?”

[It’s not difficult, so figure it out yourself. In any case, now that it has recognized my existence, Leviathan will no longer rampage. At least until it descends into the mortal realm, it should behave itself.]

“How can you be so sure? No matter how much you say it’s a demon you created, fundamentally, they are still evil beings. They have been corrupted.”

[The bond cannot be ignored.]

The man replied with a wry smile. His hollow eyes seemed to be filled with nostalgia, as if reminiscing about the past.

[Leviathan did not become a demon because I led it to. It desired it on its own, to help me. It sacrificed itself to undermine the power of the gods. Although now it has little time to maintain its sanity, that child will never initiate an attack first.]

“……Is that because that demon calls you ‘father’? Or is it just simple faith?”

[The title doesn’t matter. It originally was ‘master.’]

The man chuckled as he stroked the branch piercing through his heart.

[I simply believe.]

“……Is it certain that Leviathan will also disappear when you do?”

[I swear on the millions of lives I have consumed. If I die, the demons I created will also vanish. The very world line that was born will cease to exist.]

“That’s a relief.”

The World Tree sighed in relief and knelt before the man, wiping the blood flowing from his forehead with her hand.

“I believe in you, but I do not trust the creations you have made. I have seen with my own eyes how those beings can bring about the destruction of the world.”

[I understand.]

“You know well, but this is the last chance.”

The World Tree said.

“Creating a reincarnator, undermining the concept of reincarnation, and carving away at your soul has now reached its limit. The fact that the ‘you’ of now has little memory of your past life is proof of that. Even if this opportunity turns to vapor and the world is recreated with a one in millions chance, the ‘you’ will not regain the memories of your past life. Then we will no longer be able to intervene…”

[Don’t worry.]

The man replied, blood dripping from his mouth.

[There will be no more failures.]

Dark lightning flickered in his eyes.

[I’m tired of failures now.]

Creak.

The sound of a gear rolling in the space echoed.

The day after the expedition team arrived at the Labyrinth. Excluding the minimum number of troops to guard the supplies, all those who would enter the Labyrinth stood before Lute. Lute took in each of their faces and turned his body towards the Labyrinth.

“We’re entering.”

There were no lengthy words or explanations. The details about the Labyrinth had already been covered during the hiring phase. Without hesitation, Lute was the first to leap into the Labyrinth. Following him, the knights jumped in unison.

“Branches.”

Ellen, who was assigned to guard the mages, gently took Asel's hand and whispered. Asel smiled in response and surrendered his body to the darkness of the Labyrinth.

Swoosh!!

As his body was engulfed in darkness, he heard a noise as if someone was whispering. His vision was stained with darkness, and he felt a pressure weighing down on his entire body. However, unlike the previous Labyrinth, his mind did not feel disturbed. There was no sensation of consciousness fading away.

Eventually, when his vision brightened again.

“Master. We are touching the ground.”

Asel and the mages were inside the Labyrinth. It felt as if they had entered a cave.

Those who had arrived early were watching the air in case anyone might fail to land. Asel skillfully cast magic and landed on the ground. A puddle that had collected splashed and slightly wet his shoes.

“Any fallers?”

“None. Everyone has landed safely.”

“Good. Not bad.”

Lute nodded in satisfaction, gripping his spear tightly as he commanded the expedition team.

“Everyone, move to the predetermined positions. We will advance as soon as we are ready.”

The Labyrinth was wide enough to accommodate an entire army. Thanks to this, the formation was quickly established, and Lute began to move forward as soon as he received a report from his adjutant.

An expedition team of nearly a hundred pushed through the darkness, exploring the Labyrinth.

The first floor was nothing to worry about. As soon as they found the way down, they descended to the second floor, then to the third. They repeated this until they quickly reached the tenth floor.

From the tenth floor onward, truly threatening monsters began to appear. Tension flowed among the expedition team, and their nerves became heightened. The number of those cursing at the slightest sound began to increase.

“……Damn it. I didn’t come here for money.”

A mage walking near Asel muttered to himself, his jaw trembling. The other mages were not much different.

No matter how much they were wandering sorcerers, unless they had extensive combat experience, they could not help but feel fear in the Labyrinth. They knew that the Labyrinth, which had devoured and spat out countless heroes, would not safely let them out.

Darkness lurking everywhere. The sounds of monsters echoing from somewhere. Plants on the ceiling glimmering like eyeballs.

Blood pooling on the rocks. Pulsating organs. Thin, spine-like creatures crawling along the walls.

All of these reminded them that this world was hell. For the mages who had come thinking it would be merely a dungeon, it was as if an otherworldly realm had unfolded before them.

“How pathetic.”

However, Asel and Aleph were not greatly flustered. They already knew this was such a place, and Asel had already been to the previous Labyrinth once. Although the pressure of the actual Labyrinth was stronger, it was not to the point of being unbearable.

“Please intercept the parasitic creatures clinging to the walls.”

While moving, a knight approached the mages and spoke. Since Lute did not give direct orders but sent a liaison, it was likely because he did not want to provoke the creatures.

Intercepting the parasitic creatures was not a difficult task. The grotesque beings with white spines and red flesh clinging to the walls were waiting for an opportunity, parasitizing by tearing apart the spines of their contact.

Asel looked at them and commanded the mages, who were still maintaining their sanity.

“Please deal with them using the least noisy magic possible. There’s no need to kill them all. Just enough to keep them from poking around here.”

“……Understood.”

The mages nodded and formed seals as they began their incantations.

Whoosh!!

The completed magic became various projectiles that shattered and tore apart the spines. In an instant, half of the group of parasitic creatures disappeared without a sound, scattering into the darkness of the Labyrinth.

“……Damn.”

However, as they vanished, some began to express their anxiety instead. The disappearance of the visible threat brought about the fear that the creatures could reappear at any moment. This phenomenon was most pronounced among those holding torches for visibility.

“…….”

Despite the anxiety and fear, the expedition team continued to descend without hesitation.

Twelfth floor.

Fourteenth floor.

And when they reached the fifteenth floor.

“Everyone, put on your cloaks.”

They had arrived at the ‘Frost Zone,’ the goal and main destination of this expedition.

At the same time.

Whoosh……!!

A biting wind struck the face of one of the mercenaries. The mercenary, who was about to put on the cloak provided for warmth, suddenly stopped, and the mercenary standing next to him tilted his head as if to ask what was wrong.

Creak.

“What’s going on? What’s with the sudden…”

“…….”

“Hurry up and put on the cloak, you idiot. I don’t want to freeze to death.”

“……Creak.”

“……?”

A voice that did not sound human came from his mouth. The moment the other mercenary checked his face.

“……! Ugh!!”

Creak.

The mercenary screamed and stepped back. A knight nearby, watching the situation, furrowed his brow as he stared at the face of the man who stood frozen.

“Beware of the wind!”

The face of the man struck by the wind.

Creak, creak, creak.

Small white bugs clung to him, freezing and devouring his skin in real-time. In an instant, the man’s face, soaked in blood, began to reveal his bones, and bugs started crawling out of his ears and eyes.

Creak, creak, creak, creak, creak, creak.

“It’s the frost bugs!”

The knight shouted as he severed and crushed the head of the mercenary whose life had been extinguished.

“Cast Protection Magic, mages!!”

Whoosh……!!

A gust of wind brushed past the shouting knight's face.

Creak.

Blood flooded through the knight's helmet.

# 152 - Maze (4)

Frost Bug.

A creature that moves in groups. It travels on the winds created by its flapping wings, devouring any organic beings it comes into contact with.

It was a common aberration found in the Labyrinth, but that did not mean it was weak. In fact, its prevalence made it even more dangerous.

Consider this.

The fact that it maintains a large population in the bizarre ecosystem of the Labyrinth means that its survival strategies and combat power are exceptional. Could such creatures truly be weak and easy to deal with?

It would be troubling to think of goblins or kobolds. There was nothing more nonsensical than applying common sense in the Labyrinth. Likewise, to resolve such nonsensical matters, the power of those who wield mystical forces was essential.

“Wizard!!”

As Lute shouted urgently, a massive wall of flames rose before the exploration team.

Whoosh!!!

A frost bug that failed to evade the blazing flames was instantly reduced to ashes. However, the moment it made contact with the snow on the ground, it resurrected and buzzed through the air once more.

It was not the same as before. The resurrected frost bugs had grown to a size similar to that of a human, their jaws gaping wide as they dripped corrosive saliva.

“……This is insane.”

Death and resurrection. The faces of those confronted with this bizarre ecosystem hardened. Fortunately, the knights familiar with the Labyrinth and the bloodline of the Hargelin family quickly managed the situation.

“Burn the corpses with torches! Do not come into contact with the bugs!”

Even though they had just entered the 15th floor, there were already two casualties. If a frost bug managed to catch its prey, it would not fly off elsewhere, which was fortunate; otherwise, they would have faced even greater losses.

“How long can you maintain the magic?”

A knight asked Asel, who was looking down at the burning corpses with a cold gaze. Asel did not even turn to look at her as she replied.

“There isn’t much time. However, they are continuously pounding on the barrier from the outside.”

“……You mean the evolved frost bugs. Their exoskeletons can withstand both cold and heat, so dealing with them will be tricky.”

“Dealing with them is not the problem.”

Asel ignited flames between her fingers and spoke.

“It may sound arrogant, but I can kill them all in one strike. However, doing so would only lead to more evolved frost bugs.”

“……That’s true. But it’s fine. While their exoskeletons may be resistant to temperature, they are weak to physical shocks. Our knights and mercenaries can handle them.”

“There’s a better method.”

“……What?”

The knight asked, and Asel continued with a serious expression.

“I will melt all the snow and ice within a 10-meter radius. Please tell everyone to be cautious of the heat. It would be even better if they doused themselves in water.”

“Um… The ice and snow in the Labyrinth are not ordinary. To melt them, we would need to emit temperatures comparable to lava.”

“That’s not a problem.”

Crack.

A small sun rose from Asel’s palm.

“Proceed.”

“……I will relay this to the head and inform you of the results.”

The knight bowed and said, and Asel nodded in agreement.

A moment later, the knight who had returned to Lute briefly conversed with her and then shouted, infused with Aura.

“Everyone, take off your cloaks and change into the coolest attire possible! Those in armor can take it off for a moment! Those with spare water should pour it over themselves!”

A sudden command. A bizarre order with no clear reason. But since it was given by a knight and the one issuing the command was Lute, there was no reason not to comply.

The situation rapidly changed. The group, bundled up against the cold, simplified their attire to endure the heat. When all preparations were complete, Lute turned to Asel and nodded. Asel also nodded in response.

“Aleph, assist.”

“Understood.”

Swish!

Aleph opened a book and began to manipulate Mana. Asel extended the sun formed in her palm beyond the wall of flames and clasped her hands together.

[Formula Fusion]

[Flame Spell: Holy Flame Spell]

[Asteroid Construction]

Crack!!!

The surging Mana was absorbed by the sun, and Aleph quickly calculated the formula to adjust the most suitable flow.

Thus, an artificial sun was formed.

[Full Crimson Falling Flame]

Whoosh……!!

The interior of the sun filled with flames, scattering brilliance and heat in all directions. Just by existing, the surrounding temperature skyrocketed, and Asel used Freezing Magic within the barrier to regulate the temperature, unlike the outside.

Even so, the temperature did not decrease. Breathing was possible, but even while standing still, sweat poured down in streams due to the intense heat inside the barrier.

* Kieeeeeeeeeek!!!!

The situation above was even more serious. Unable to withstand the overwhelming heat, the ice and snow in the Labyrinth began to flow like water. The frost bugs, which had strong resistance to temperature, also flew near the sun, only to have their wings catch fire and plummet.

It was literally a falling star.

The sun, created by humans, illuminated the Labyrinth and pushed back the cold. The still-evolving frost bugs could not endure the heat and collapsed, but the ice and snow remaining on the ground no longer existed. They turned to ashes and were forever obliterated.

Five minutes passed, and just as the temperature inside the barrier was about to rise sharply, Asel withdrew the sun and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead.

“Environmental adjustment complete. I will handle the rest.”

The words infused with Mana were met with a response from Lute.

“Is that possible?”

“It is.”

A voice filled with confidence. Lute shifted her gaze forward instead of saying anything more.

“Understood.”

At the same moment she spoke, the barrier dissipated, replaced by a massive door.

[Great Flame Gate]

A door made of flames burned fiercely in a closed state. At that bizarre sight, not only the mercenaries but even the faces of the wizards stiffened.

“Open.”

Creeeak…….

The closed door slowly opened, and the flames that had gathered inside began to form a single sphere.

Finally, when the door was completely opened.

Kwaaaaaaa!!!

A pillar of flame burst forth, sweeping across the front. Everyone squinted at the overwhelming heat and flames, and as the flames and the Great Flame Gate disappeared, the surrounding temperature began to return to normal. In an instant, everyone hurriedly put on the clothes they had just taken off.

Lute wrapped her cloak around herself, a wry smile on her face as she examined the results of the magic.

“……That’s an absurd level of firepower. You said it was resistant to heat, but did it project firepower strong enough to ignore that resistance?”

The area where the pillar of flame had passed.

What was visible was nothing but a puddle of water, some ice and snow, and ashes. The flying frost bugs had completely vanished.

Frost bugs are one of the most bothersome aberrations in Labyrinth exploration. For a single wizard to wipe them all out like this was truly the skill of the youngest 7th-tier wizard. Judging by her ability to adjust the firepower of her magic and use the appropriate formulas, it seemed she had a natural talent for combat.

‘My daughter has found a good connection.’

Lute thought this as he began to regain control over the disordered group.

There was not much time to indulge in sentimentality. He ordered the mercenaries to collect the bodies of the two who had become corpses and then led the exploration team again.

It was the moment when the group, stepping over the ashes, began to advance deeper into the Labyrinth.

Asel’s overwhelming magic was enough to boost the morale of the exploration team. The guards drew closer to Asel, and the wizards squinted their eyes, eager to witness even a little more of Asel’s magic instead of feeling fear.

Though it was not the most suitable appearance for exploration, it was still better than trembling in fear. Asel thought this as she popped a piece of jerky into her mouth.

At that moment, Lute halted the exploration team. But this time, instead of a battle signal or a shout, she sent a signal through her aide for the group to remain silent. Asel focused her Mana in her eyes to sneak a glance at what had appeared ahead.

“Hello.”

A man in formal attire suddenly appeared directly in front of Lute.

There was only one of him, but the sight was utterly horrific. Behind the man in formal attire, it looked as if hundreds of humans had fused together, their heads and limbs grotesquely joined.

As a result, he had a massive body, and the part dragging on the ground was smeared with blood and flesh.

A being close to a monster. However, instead of attacking first, it displayed a friendly demeanor and spoke to Lute.

“Do you happen to know the way out of here? I accidentally fell into this place, and it seems I’m lost…”

“I see.”

Lute replied in a very considerate tone, not provoking it.

“The way out is behind. If you follow the path, you should find the exit.”

“Oh, I see! Thank you!”

It bowed its head in gratitude.

Splatter.

As its bent waist split in half, its upper body fell to the ground. Blood and organs spilled out, soaking the floor, but it paid no mind and continued to speak.

“I’m sorry to ask, but could you guide me? I’m a bit scared to go alone…”

“I’m sorry. We have our own matters to attend to. I don’t think we can guide you.”

“Oh, is that so… Then there’s nothing I can do. Thank you for the directions. I’ll go the rest of the way alone.”

It said this and began to move its heavy body along the path the exploration team had taken. Asel glanced at the aberration passing right beside her and frowned. At that moment, one of the hundreds of heads on its back stared directly at Asel and opened its mouth.

“Save me…”

“……!”

“Help, help me… I’d rather die, please kill me…!”

It was not just that head that spoke. Following the blood-red carpet on the ground, voices echoed from all directions.

“I don’t want to die.” “Free me from here! Please!” “I didn’t volunteer for the exploration team to end up like this. I deserve to enjoy more honor!” “Mom, mom…” “Please tell my husband this.” “Survivor! Is there a survivor?” “I’m scared, scared, scared.” “Demon! It’s a demon!” “I love you.” “Damn Hargelin!!!!! You deceived me!”

As the shouting voices faded away, it also disappeared from sight. When Lute could no longer hear its footsteps, she gave the exploration team the order to advance again. Asel asked Ellen, who was beside her.

“……What was that?”

“A thought entity and a tomb within the Labyrinth.”

Ellen replied, sweating coldly.

“It’s the being that slaughtered the entire exploration team, including the previous head.”

“……What?”

“The previous head, my grandfather, was an Aura master. There were also masters and archmages in the exploration team.”

She exhaled deeply.

“That thing killed them all by itself. Those it carries on its back are those it killed.”

“…….”

“It’s best not to get entangled with it.”

“Hargelin!!!!!!!!!!!”

As Ellen’s words were cut off, the voice of the aberration echoed from the other side.

“I will curse you even in death!!!!!”

A voice filled with resentment and will. But no one reacted to it.

“I will curse you forever!!!!!”

The group did not stop and continued to move forward.

# 153 - Apostle

The Hargelin family periodically explores and conquers the Labyrinth.

It was both a tradition and a kind of task. An identity and role bestowed upon them by the kingdom. By granting them a position similar to that of a baron, they were endowed with immense power. Thanks to this, Hargelin held considerable authority in the kingdom, despite not engaging in politics.

In return, the price they had to pay was the exploration of the Labyrinth. More precisely, it involved periodically exterminating the monsters that crawled out of the Labyrinth and investigating and addressing the anomalies within it.

While it sounded easy, it was far from a trivial task. The very nature of the Labyrinth was common knowledge to be hellish.

The purpose of this exploration was not much different from previous ones. After exterminating the monsters that emerged from the Labyrinth, they would enter it. Their goal was to investigate the environment from which the monsters had crawled out and destroy the core of the layer.

“The core is, in other words, the apex predator.”

Ellen whispered as she walked alongside Asel.

“Once we deal with the monster that rules the layer and crush its heart, the exploration will be over. After that, we just need to find our way back.”

“Then we just need to find and kill that monster that called the grave, right? If it’s strong enough to massacre several masters and archmages, it should be powerful enough.”

It was true that Aura masters and archmages were significantly stronger than other superhumans, but that didn’t mean they were entirely otherworldly beings. In fact, those who could not control their power were often hunted by those weaker than themselves. There was a reason they spent a year honing their Mana after reaching a certain level.

However, that did not mean their military strength could be ignored. No matter how inexperienced, a master was still a master. They could easily annihilate a whole squad on their own. Ellen’s grandfather had led an exploration team that included several such masters.

Yet, they had all been wiped out by a single monster. If that were true, there could be no monster stronger than the ‘grave’ in this Labyrinth.

No matter how bizarre the ecosystem of the Labyrinth was, there were limits. If a monster more horrific than the grave existed and it was the core of the layer, the exploration team would never achieve their goal. They would likely end up with their heads and bodies separated.

“The grave is a kind of phenomenon. It can appear in any layer of the Labyrinth, and its strength is indeed unparalleled. But that’s precisely why it can never be the core.”

Fortunately, Ellen directly refuted Asel’s concerns.

“A monster that becomes the core is the apex predator that establishes the ecosystem of the layer. The grave, which can appear in any layer, does not meet that condition. It does not establish an ecosystem and is not influenced by it.”

“Hmm.”

“That’s why we avoid disturbing the grave. There’s no reason to spill blood unnecessarily.”

“What about the cores of the previous layers?”

Asel asked while dealing with a crawling parasitic creature. Ellen thoroughly protected him, shielding him from the debris of the burst life forms as she answered.

“If we destroy the core of the lower layer, all the cores of the upper layers will die as well. That’s why we start hunting the cores from the 15th layer, the lowest layer that can affect the surface.”

“……So, the fact that we regularly explore means that even if we destroy them, they will regenerate over time.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Ellen shook off the flesh stuck to her axe.

“Yet, it is something that must be done.”

“Attention, everyone!”

About six hours into their entry into the Labyrinth, as everyone was starting to tire, Lute shouted while looking around at everyone.

“We will spend a day here and then continue the exploration. Due to the nature of the Labyrinth environment, the probability of having nightmares is high, so those who wish to sleep should keep that in mind. Request food from the responsible officer.”

“…….How do we manage the night watch?”

“Designate a leader for each squad to select. I will not interfere beyond that.”

“Are the mages also supposed to take the night watch?”

At Lute’s words, a mage behind Asel trembled and glared.

“Are you saying that our mages, who are such important assets for the exploration, should be treated like this? What if they can’t use their magic in time? Magic is about mental strength, you know! The quality of sleep is crucial!”

“Everyone is struggling. I don’t think we can give special treatment just because you’re a mage.”

Despite the mage’s plea, Lute’s stance was firm. He commanded the knights to set up tents to prepare for the cold, his expression turning icy.

“And the mage who should be receiving special treatment is keeping quiet. Why are you the one speaking up?”

“Th-That’s……!”

The mage opened his mouth, but no words came out. Lute ignored him and joined the other knights in preparing the camp. Asel glanced at his back for a moment before unfolding a tent with Aleph.

The two set up a tent large enough for them to comfortably stay in. Asel casually tossed Aleph inside the tent and then started a small fire to make a simple stew.

The stew contained only salt, seasoning, jerky, and pieces of bread, but it was enough to satisfy a meal.

It would have been fine to go to the food officer and get some porridge, but it was better to make it himself. It allowed for a moment of thought.

“…….”

As he looked down at the boiling stew, he calmed his eyes.

The environment of the Labyrinth was, quite literally, close to hell. From the ‘grave’ that devoured people and grew in size to frost bugs and memory eaters, there were beings that could not be suppressed by human strength, endlessly repeating death and birth.

The root of it all must surely be the demon of genesis sealed within the Labyrinth.

‘In the end, the ultimate goal and direction of the Labyrinth exploration is to exterminate demons.’

Whether that was actually possible was a secondary concern; it was clear that it was something that had to be done someday. However, in terms of priority, it wasn’t something that needed to be done immediately.

Asel remembered the words of the sage.

‘Help the demon of possibility to kill the primordial demon. That is the only way to save the world.’

The primordial demon was a being he had never seen in books, and even Aleph did not know of it. The sage had identified it as an enemy that must be killed.

Unlike other demons, the demon of possibility had decided on a method of ‘salvation’ not through the rebirth of humanity but by exterminating the primordial demon. Perhaps all the plans being laid out now were great steps toward that goal.

The problem was the fundamental question of whether it was really okay to believe in demons. No matter how good things the sage had said about the demon of possibility, it was difficult to take it at face value.

After all, Asel did not even know exactly what kind of person the sage was. He knew that the sage was the only transcendent being left on the surface, but beyond that, he knew nothing. Not their gender, age, or even their sign.

Thinking extremely, it was possible that the sage had also lost their mind like the other transcendent beings. Since all the other transcendent beings had, there was no reason to believe the sage was any different.

“……Huh.”

While lost in thought, the stew was completed. Asel scooped some broth and ingredients into his mouth while glancing around.

Thanks to the distribution of food, there was no one trembling from hunger, but many were still suffering from the cold. Asel could temporarily raise the temperature through Flame Spells, but that would quickly deplete his Mana.

It was a different level of difficulty than starting a campfire. To melt an entire frost zone, a massive amount of heat and flames were needed. He could attempt it, but maintaining it would be nearly impossible.

No matter how much Mana Asel possessed, there were limits. Recklessly trying to force it would be foolish.

“Master. I’m hungry too.”

At that moment, Aleph peeked her head out from beyond the tent and said. Asel took a spoonful of stew and fed it to her.

“How does it taste?”

“It’s hot.”

Hoo, hoo.

Aleph pouted her lips, struggling to cool down the heat of the stew. After a moment, once she had calmed down a bit, she licked the broth from her lips and replied.

“It’s quite good. How did you manage to cook at this level in a place that’s not a kitchen!”

“Don’t make a fuss.”

“Yes.”

Aleph came out of the tent and sat close to Asel. Her warm body temperature was transmitted directly to him.

“So far, things are going smoothly. We’ve reached the 15th layer, and there have only been two casualties. It’s almost a miracle. It’s probably thanks to the exploration leader choosing efficient routes. Of course, the decisive reason is your magic.”

“……I won’t deny that.”

Asel said with a wry smile as he continued to eat the stew. Aleph opened her mouth like a baby bird next to him, and Asel shared the stew with her to warm them both against the cold.

“Head of the family.”

At that moment, one of the knights from the scouting squad led by Lute returned with a pale expression and whispered to Lute. Asel, who had enhanced his senses through Mana, listened in on their conversation.

“All members of the scouting squad have returned safely. However… there is some bad news.”

“Did you discover a number of graves?”

“No, it’s not that…”

The knight trailed off, looking as if he doubted whether he had really seen what he thought he had.

The expressions of the other squad members were equally grim. It was only then that Lute realized they had discovered something outrageous and asked with a stiff face.

“……What is it?”

“……The core.”

The knight struggled to speak.

“The core is damaged.”

“……What?”

# 154 - Apostle (2)

The core was destroyed. This meant that the monster at the apex of the 15th floor was dead.

'It's not impossible.'

The pyramid of the food chain could change at any time. Even the beast at the top was vulnerable if a new, stronger being appeared. The Labyrinth was no exception to this rule.

Or perhaps another monster had crawled up from a lower floor. This was more plausible than a completely new monster being born and destroying the core.

"..."

Either way, it wasn't good news for the exploration team.

The deeper one went into the Labyrinth, the harsher the environment became. The monsters became more aggressive, and their sheer size became ridiculously large. Two people had already died from the Frost Worm on the 15th floor, and if even stronger monsters started appearing one after another, the exploration team wouldn't be able to withstand it.

If a new monster had appeared, the situation was even worse. There was nothing more insane than fighting a monster with no known weaknesses.

"…Not good."

In the end, Asel sighed deeply and looked up at the ceiling. Aleph, who was next to him, curled up and breathed heavily.

It was a time when everyone was asleep. In the dreamscape ruled by those lost in nightmares, with only a minimal number of guards on watch, Asel was still awake. The reason was simple: he just couldn't sleep.

There were several reasons if one delved deeper.

Contemplation about demons. Objectifying his own abilities. Miguel Hargelein. The core. The food chain. The lower floors, and so on.

A vortex of thoughts consumed his brain, warding off fatigue.

Thanks to this, his mind was quite clear, but his body was quite tired. Even so, not sleeping was insane, but he couldn't use magic to fall asleep either.

Sleep magic had side effects as certain as its effects. The probability of having nightmares increased dramatically, and even if one woke up, the fatigue wouldn't go away. It wasn't natural sleep, but sleep through magic, so the body rejected it.

So, it was better to take a nap than to force himself to sleep using magic. Asel thought so, and tried to erase his thoughts and somehow fall asleep.

And just as he was finally entering a light sleep after tossing and turning for exactly 30 minutes.

"...Time to wake up, Byeokcheon."

"Ah."

It was time for his watch. Asel shook off his disheveled hair and got up from his sleeping place.

When he went outside the tent, he saw the guard who had woken him up shivering in the cold. Asel cast a warmth spell on her body and sent her back to her tent. She nodded with a much more comfortable expression and hurried back.

He shifted his gaze forward.

The bonfire, devouring firewood to sustain itself, was providing a little warmth. It wasn't enough to get rid of the cold, but it was better than nothing. Asel used magic to make the flames bigger and tightened the cloak he was wearing.

"You were here first."

Then, Ellen approached him from across the fire. Her guard bowed to Ellen and returned to the tent, making clanging sounds with her armor. Asel chuckled as he looked at Ellen, who sat down opposite him.

"What if your escort arrives later than me?"

"Sorry. She seems to have fallen into a deep sleep. She didn't want to wake up from her dream."

Ellen responded to Asel's joke and took off her helmet. Her shimmering blonde hair caught the light of the bonfire, sparkling like barley.

"How are you feeling?"

"No problem. I feel like I can fight right now. Maybe I can even fight and beat you."

"That's a relief."

Asel smiled and threw firewood into the bonfire.

A sharp thorn sticking out of the wood pricked his palm. Asel used delicate telekinetic magic to pull out the thorn and opened his mouth.

"I heard the core, that is, the strongest monster on this floor, died."

"...How did you know that?"

Ellen asked with a stiff expression. Asel replied vaguely and turned his head towards her.

"I just heard it. Anyway, do you know how to deal with it?"

"...I'm going to the place where the body was found first."

Clang.

She said, putting down the ax she was holding.

"Did I explain what the core of the 15th floor looks like?"

"No."

"The core here is a cube-shaped monster. You're a mage, so you know what a cube is, right?"

"I know that."

Cubes were quite rare, but they were essential for mages. Manipulating cubes with Mana to get a feel for it was the most common training method, so they couldn't help but know.

"Its name is the Cube of Balance. It has the power to transform its shape and reassemble the parts that touch the surface."

"…Reassemble?"

"If a person touches it, it releases that part and transforms it into something completely new. The brain rejects the transformed part, eventually leading to death."

"..."

Just imagining it was enough to know that it was not an easy monster. Asel made a sound of contemplation, and Ellen continued in a subdued tone.

"It's the size of a house, but it's fast. It's difficult to deal with when it transforms into a giant sword, cannon, or bug. The way to kill it is to burst its heart, which only opens at the moment of transformation."

"Something killed that kind of monster?"

"And in a terrible way."

The sound of the burning bonfire cut through the conversation between the two.

"I heard that all parts of the body were torn to shreds. As if the whole body had been slashed with a sword."

"…A sword, huh."

"The torn and ripped parts were too clean to have been attacked with claws or teeth. That's what everyone there testified."

"Are there any monsters that use swords?"

"There are, but they're not common. They might appear on the lower floors of the Labyrinth. Their skills are comparable to those of a master."

"So there's a good chance that it came up from the lower floors."

"I guess so."

Haa.

Ellen sighed deeply and lowered her head.

"Personally, I hope that's the case. It's better to know the monster than to have a completely new one appear."

"That's true."

Asel answered and ate a piece of dried fruit. He gave a few to Ellen and used magic to check if there was anything wrong around them.

There were no life signs detected yet. At least for now, they were safe.

"Now that the core has been destroyed, there's no reason to stay here. But we still have to investigate, so we'll check the core, figure out the cause of death, and then leave the Labyrinth quickly."

"Not bad. It's a better choice than going down to investigate the incident."

"We must not forget our purpose. Although it's not something we did, we shouldn't force it."

Ellen bit into the dried apple slice that Asel had given her and turned to look at him.

"I heard that there was a strange energy left in the torn body. We also need a mage to analyze the cause of death and find out the identity of that energy."

"Analysis isn't my specialty."

"Is it difficult?"

Ellen asked with pure curiosity. Asel pondered for a moment, then smiled and replied.

"It's not difficult. I'll try. If I bring other mages, it might not be impossible."

"Hmm. Good. Don't worry. I'll stick right next to you and make sure nothing happens."

"That's reassuring. Do you want more fruit?"

"I won't refuse if you give it to me. Thanks."

"Here."

As they talked, the night grew deeper. No one knew if the surface was really night, but the Labyrinth was still night.

And then came the bright morning.

Asel, who had stayed up all night, woke up Aleph and folded the tent. Aleph was not used to the act of sleeping, so he was still sluggish even after opening his eyes, but after an electric current swept through his body, he quickly came to his senses and packed up the tent.

Breakfast was simple. It meant that the porridge that had been distributed last night was distributed again. The porridge was viscous, but the taste itself wasn't too bad. It was pretty good when dipped in bread.

After finishing their meal, they quickly reorganized. Everyone finished preparing to continue the exploration, and Lute appeared, making clanging sounds with his armor. He held his spear tightly and said without a hint of fatigue.

"I confirmed the location of the core last night. However, due to the discovery of an anomaly, everyone except the elite will prepare to withdraw from here. The elites will go with me to investigate the anomaly. The list was completed at dawn, so act accordingly."

"...What about the safety of this place if the elites disappear?"

"I made the list with that in mind too. Don't worry."

That was actually the case. The list was made based on experience and seniority rather than pure force. The pure force was similar for both the investigation unit and the remaining unit.

Only then did those who were convinced begin to move according to their respective roles. Naturally, Asel, who was part of the investigation unit, greeted Aleph, who was included in the remaining unit, and headed to the location of the core with Ellen.

The core had died not far from here. This was why they didn't mobilize a large number of troops to move.

"There are no creatures left around. But don't let your guard down. If anything happens, be sure to send a signal."

"Yes!"

The knights spread out around the dead core to form a defensive line, and Asel also used a barrier Formula to minimize external intrusion.

The remains of the core were now safe. Asel, along with the mages who were moving with him, narrowed his eyes as he looked at the cube's corpse, which had been torn to shreds.

"It's more like a bioweapon than a cube. Instead of the beauty of monochrome, it's covered in blood and flesh."

As the old mage said. Unlike the black and white cube that Asel knew. The Cube of Balance was made of blood, red flesh, bones, and organs.

The shape was slightly different from that of humans, but it was not that of animals either. It looked like a component that made up something completely new. The only thing that was similar was the heart, which was the source of life, and it was very large, like that of a whale. Even though it was torn, one could still guess its shape.

"...It would have been very difficult to deal with if it were alive."

Although he didn't answer, everyone agreed with him. Asel, with Ellen next to him, grabbed the torn heart with his hand and rummaged through it.

"Aren't you going to get hurt if you touch it? It feels very ominous..."

"I don't feel any strange energy from the heart. But the cut surface is unique. It looks like it was cut with a sword, but it looks like it was bitten once after cutting it. There are slight teeth marks."

Traces that were hard to see unless you looked closely. The size wasn't very obvious, but it wasn't difficult to find if you looked directly at it like this. Asel ran his finger along the mark, which was exactly the same shape as a human tooth, and made a sound of contemplation.

"It has a human-like oral structure, has the power to cleanly deal with monsters, and has the characteristic of chewing and tearing... Do you have any monsters with similar characteristics in mind?"

"...No. At least not within 20 floors. The bestiary passed down in the Hargelein family only goes that far."

"Then that means it may have come down from a lower floor. That's not good news."

Asel clicked his tongue and put down the heart. He cleaned his blood-soaked hands with magic, examined the areas where the bones and nerves were tattered, and ran his finger over his lips.

"Come over here."

Then, one of the mages who was looking at the cube's brain called everyone together. He pointed to the brain, which was infinitely smaller than the heart, and his eyes sparkled.

"I feel a strange power here. The shape is also slightly different from a normal brain. It's as if it's a shape that shouldn't exist. It's ironic that it exists intact even though it's virtually impossible to operate properly."

"How do you know that?"

"I've been researching the brains of living things for 30 years. If you don't know, shut up and stay quiet."

The face of the mercenary who was suddenly subjected to verbal abuse was distorted like a demon, but the mage didn't care and picked up the brain and held it out so that everyone could see it.

"Did it get this kind of brain because it's a monster? That's a plausible theory. But this brain won't be the cube's. There's something strange about the identity of this strange power that makes it seem like it's not from a monster."

"...It's the power of a demon."

"Oh?"

The mage turned his head sharply at Asel's words.

"You know it!"

"...I have some experience with it. I'm familiar with this energy."

Asel had directly dealt with demon worshippers and had even infiltrated them. More than anything, he had briefly faced the demon of the deep sea.

The energy he felt at that time was somewhat similar to the energy he felt from that brain. It was an energy that could never be felt from a simple creation of a demon, an energy that could only be sensed if there was a direct connection, and it was dripping down the brain folds.

"If it's the energy of a demon, then it's clear. It means that the being who set foot here is related to a specific demon, and if we focus on that, we can find out who killed the cube."

"That's right. We'll have to find out from now on whether it's the work of demon worshippers or something done by an apostle."

The mage said so and snickered, and Asel narrowed his eyes.

'It doesn't seem like the demon worshippers did it. There's no reason for those guys to crawl all the way down here, and I didn't feel their energy at all while coming down.'

"Oh, what a beautiful figure! I've been researching brains for a long time, but I've never seen a more radiant figure!"

'In the first place, the shape and size of the brain are too deformed to be human. No matter how much I wash the brain, normal activity is impossible with that shape.'

"What if this was my brain? What kind of reaction would I have if I had this brain? What about my thinking ability? Intelligence? Physical reaction? Nerve and motor skills? Ah, I'm dying to know!"

'Then is it the work of a demon's apostle? I haven't met an apostle yetㅡ'

The moment he thought that.

Kiiing!!!

Red light poured out from the brain that the mage was holding, illuminating the space.

"Ah?"

"…!"

The mage made a stupid sound at the sudden burst of light, and Asel grabbed Ellen out of ominousness and fell to the floor.

It was at the same time.

Pubeobeong!!!!

The mage's head exploded like a balloon, scattering faint radiance over his neck. But the body, which had lost its head, did not collapse powerlessly, but wriggled, bringing the heart in its hand to its neck and attaching it.

At that bizarre movement, Lute quickly came to his senses and threw his spear.

Ssaeaeaek!!

The spear blade, which exceeded the speed of sound, burst a sonic boom and blew away the mage's upper body. But the brain, which flowed down at a similar speed, sealed the wound and charged at Lute in the pierced state, punching him in the chest.

Wooddeuk!!

"Keuheok!"

His armor was split as it was, and his ribs were crushed. The broken bones poked at his organs, and his body slammed into the wall.

A bizarre movement that could not be said to be the body of a mage. But the skilled knights did not panic, but quickly reorganized their ranks and confronted the monster with their respective weapons.

"Check on the head of the family! Mages, prepare a magic that will burn that thing whole!"

The adjutant shouted and swung his greatsword. The monster dodged the attack with a wriggling movement and kicked the adjutant's knee, tearing his leg apart. Pieces of the broken leg scattered on the floor, and the adjutant gritted his teeth and swung his greatsword down, balancing on his only remaining leg.

An attack that was too close to dodge. So, instead of dodging, the monster took the attack with its whole body.

Jjeoeoooeeong!!!

With a tremendous crash, the grotesque being, split in two, tumbled to the floor. The lieutenant, supporting his swaying body with his greatsword, glared at the bisected monster.

"Don't let it regenerate! Dismember it before it does!"

At the lieutenant's command, the knights leaped into action. But the grotesque being, far from regenerating, rolled aside to evade the attacks, and, using its single arm and leg, lurched towards Asel and Ellen.

"Get lost."

Simultaneously, Asel's Mana manifested. A fiery cross descended, turning the monster's torso into ashes. Fortunately, the grotesque being, having melted away in an instant, did not move even in its ashen state. A lull ensued.

That's what everyone thought. The knights moved to tend to the lord and lieutenant, who had been swiftly injured, and just as Asel was about to absorb the lingering Mana of his spell...

Thwack!

A black arm shot out from the ashes and seized Asel's wrist. The hand, shattering his Shield completely, crushed his wrist and pulled him in. Asel's face contorted in pain and the irresistible force.

"Kuh?!"

"Asel!"

Ellen, who was standing next to him, reacted immediately. She swung her axe at the arm that was gripping Asel's wrist.

"……!"

But the arm didn't budge. Rather, it became even more solid, pulling Asel into the ashes with a snap.

"Damn it!"

Ellen, grabbing onto Asel's disappearing sleeve, also plunged into the ashes with him. At the same moment, the ashes scattered in the wind, vanishing as if they had never existed.

It had all happened in less than a second. The exploration team, having lost two people in an instant, gaped at the unbelievable sight.

"……What the fuck just happened?"

The birth of the grotesque being. The death of the mage. The injuries of Lute and the lieutenant. The disappearance of Asel and Ellen.

All of this had occurred in a mere five seconds. Not a long time even for superhumans who lived in fleeting moments, yet in that time, a series of major events had unfolded.

And before they could even fully process it, a crackling sound echoed from the hallway.

[Creak.]

[Creeeak.]

It was the sound of the parasitic creatures made of spines. Clinging to the walls and ceiling, they chattered their jaws with frosty bodies, baring their maws at the exploration team.

"……Son of a bitch. We're fucked."

Someone's coarse curse echoed through the space as they witnessed the scene.

Once again, there was no reply.

But everyone agreed with his words.

# 155 - Apostle (3)

"Cough!"

Immediately after being seized by the pulling force, Asel tumbled across the floor, gasping for air. He felt pain in his crushed left arm, but he gritted his teeth and reinforced the shattered Shield, adding Electrification Art on top.

He hadn't been complacent. He hadn't been arrogant, nor had he been careless. Yet, the Shield had been completely destroyed.

He had guessed as much when he saw Lute's armor being smashed, but the physical abilities were beyond absurd.

No matter how skilled a Master might be, it was extremely difficult to tear apart Asel's Shield with bare hands as if it were paper. However, the monster that had suddenly appeared had done just that, and this was the result. Asel pushed himself up from the floor with his good arm and quickly scanned his surroundings.

"..."

A barren cave met his eyes. Water droplets falling from the ceiling created noise, but other than that, there were no sounds to be heard. Even when he activated detection magic, no presence was detected.

"...Was I dragged into a completely different space?"

Asel remembered being grabbed by the monster and sucked into the ashes. If this place was a world created by the monster, there couldn't be a worse situation.

A monster with its own unique world reigned like a god within that world. There were ways to break through, but it was still difficult to deal with.

The best way was to open his Imagery and counter, but Asel hadn't yet acquired an Imagery. That left only the option of crushing the space itself or killing the owner of the unique world.

Either way was a headache. Asel clicked his tongue and decided to heal his crushed arm first.

Clink.

He took out a regeneration potion he had brought and placed it beside him, then pulled out the bone fragments that had pierced through his flesh. He felt a pain that seemed to scorch his brain, but he gritted his teeth and ignored it.

After removing all the splinters, he poured the potion on the wound to boost his healing power. Bones he hadn't managed to pull out crawled out, and Asel wrapped a bandage around the wound, breathing roughly.

There were potions that could instantly heal wounds, but it was a waste to use them on such a minor injury.

Unless he knew exactly what this place was, he couldn't afford to use a potion that was as good as a spare life. The situation was urgent, but that didn't mean he couldn't tell right from wrong.

"Hoo..."

He pulled the bandage tight to stop the bleeding and tied the end to secure it. It quickly turned red, but he ignored it and stood up.

"Ugh."

He tried to move his fingers, but they only twitched slightly. They weren't working properly. The pain was extremely severe compared to the movement.

It seemed the wrist bones had been completely crushed, and the impact had affected his fingers as well. He had poured a healing potion on it, so it would be fine in a few days, but he would have to endure the pain for at least today.

It was okay. He had plenty of experience enduring pain. He was also used to not showing it. Asel pushed aside the throbbing pain and quickly used detection magic.

Still, no presence was detected. He narrowed the search range even further, but still, not even a bug was caught.

Isolation. He was literally stranded on a deserted island. The future was bleak, but he couldn't just stand still.

'I've never researched Space spell, but I still know the basic Formulas. I can imitate them well enough.'

If this space was really the monster's unique world, he could physically tear it apart and get out. There were many things to consider, such as coordinates, but escape was possible.

But...

"...Now that I look at it, I don't think it's a unique world."

If it was a place created by the monster, there should be something bizarre about it. Walls made of flesh, a blood-red sky, moving corpses, distortions, etc. At least one of the typical characteristics that deviated from common sense should have manifested.

But there was nothing to be seen here. It was just the inside of a simple cave.

Above all, he didn't feel the monster's unique eerie atmosphere. Instead, a stickier, heavier energy filled the area.

'The energy of the Labyrinth.'

There was no need to think long. What filled the air here was the unique Mana and malice of the Labyrinth.

However, the Mana pressure he felt was even more severe than before. It seemed he had been forcibly dragged into the lower levels of the Labyrinth, which was even worse than being trapped in a unique world.

Since the ways to escape on his own were limited, he would have to spend at least a few days here, struggling to find an exit. No matter how strong he was, it was all useless if he couldn't find an exit. No matter how high he had risen to the 7th Circle, he would starve to death if he couldn't eat.

"...It's better to move."

Whatever the situation, he couldn't just stand still. If he didn't want to die, he had to find an exit and move as quickly as possible.

'The only food I have left is some dried fruit and jerky. If I conserve my water, I can last at least a few weeks. But if it goes beyond that...'

Just imagining it made him feel disgusted. Asel adjusted the amount of bleeding through Blood Magic and took slow steps.

At the same time, ashes rained down from the ceiling.

Asel, familiar with the gray powder, snapped his head up and was about to attack when Ellen suddenly appeared from within the falling ashes and plummeted. Asel's eyes widened as he caught the falling Ellen.

"...Ugh. Where..."

Fortunately, Ellen quickly opened her eyes. She regained her senses while floating in Asel's magic and looked around. Then, the two made eye contact.

"Asel...! Are you okay? Your arm? How are you? Does your head hurt?"

"I'm fine except for my arm. What about you?"

Asel asked as he lowered her to the ground. Ellen staggered for a moment when her feet touched the ground, but she quickly regained her balance and shook the ashes from her hair.

"I'm fine. I wasn't attacked."

"That's a relief. One patient is enough."

"...I'm sorry. If I had protected you better, this wouldn't have happened."

"It's okay. What could you have done in that situation?"

Asel massaged his neck and glanced around.

The monster that had suddenly killed the mage and stolen his body possessed a power that was on a different level from other monsters. Its physical abilities were absurd, and it had the bizarre habit of attacking and dragging people away even when its whole body was burning.

If he had known the monster's identity in advance, he wouldn't have let the mage touch his brain. So this was just an accident born of ignorance.

As the saying goes, all safety rules are written in blood.

This was a tragedy that occurred because he didn't know the monster's characteristics. Blaming someone wasn't a good idea.

"It's good that you're okay. It seems like we're in the lower levels of the Labyrinth, so let's find an exit and go up. I don't know the exact floor, but if it's the lower levels, the exit should be big."

"...Okay. But try not to use your arm as much as possible. I'll do all the work that requires strength."

"It's okay. I can solve it with magic."

"No, don't use magic unless it's absolutely necessary."

"What?"

Asel turned to her and asked. Ellen lowered the axe in her hand towards the ground and replied.

"If this is really the lower levels of the Labyrinth, there will be restrictions on using magic. The same goes for Aura. In the first place, all power that uses Mana is restricted."

"......I didn't really feel that."

"There's no problem using it. The problem is what happens after you use it."

She clenched and unclenched her fist, letting out a little Aura.

"There's no Mana in the lower levels of the Labyrinth. All that exists is Magical energy. The increased Mana pressure is proof of that."

"...No Mana."

Now that he heard it, he could realize it.

He couldn't feel the Mana that always surrounded his body at all.

It would be an exaggeration to say that he was late to notice because his head was complicated... Asel's talent wasn't so weak that it would fade just because he was thinking too much.

Then there was only one reason.

"Does Magical energy suppress cognitive abilities?"

"Not just cognitive abilities. Overall physical abilities, recovery, Mana sensitivity and control, etc. All the abilities necessary for humans are impaired. Those with great talent or Hetero ability can resist to some extent, but it's impossible to ignore it completely."

Ellen knocked on the wall with her fist and spat out. The fist containing Aura slightly cracked the wall, creating flint.

"Since there's no Mana, it's impossible to regenerate Mana and Aura. So we have to be careful about consumption."

"...It's too harsh an environment for a mage. And I only have a very small amount of Mana regeneration potions left."

Asel grumbled as he chewed on a painkiller. Ellen took the split flint into her arms and readjusted her axe.

"It can't be helped. So use magic more carefully. You have a lot of Mana, so you can last quite a while, but there's still a limit."

"...I guess so. You should save your Aura as much as possible too. Let's avoid fighting unless it's necessary."

"Okay. I understand."

"Let's go then. We can't stay here forever."

"Let's. Come behind me."

Ellen slung her axe over her shoulder and started walking forward. Asel turned off the Shield he had always maintained and followed her, fiddling with his Magical artifact.

"What did you say?"

It was around that time that the exploration team, who were preparing to withdraw, learned of the disappearance of the two.

# 156 - Apostle (4)

Those preparing to retreat weren't in such bad spirits, actually. Although two people had died, they had survived and were able to return without any major injuries.

There were plenty of reasons to be happy, and no reason to be upset.

So, dragging their tired bodies, they somehow managed to finish the preparations for the retreat.

And then the investigation team returned.

"...Didn't the number of people decrease?"

The team, which had numbered nearly 50 when they departed, had dwindled to less than 10. The survivors didn't look good either.

"...Cough."

Lute, supported by the knights, coughed up blood. Blood dripped from the gaps in his mangled armor, and bones were faintly visible through the torn leather of his back. Despite his severe injuries, the spear he held was covered in the bones and flesh of parasitic creatures.

The adjutant, who had lost a leg, was in a similar state. His back was relatively intact, but blood dripped from his cleaved greatsword. The severed leg was, of course, missing.

Besides them, many others were staggering as if they were about to collapse. All were suffering from excessive bleeding, Mana exhaustion, and mental fatigue. They had managed to stay alive with the supplied potions, but frankly, it wouldn't be surprising if any of them died at any moment.

"Hmm."

Aleph felt no emotion upon seeing them. Or rather, she didn't feel they were worth it.

To her, everyone except Asel was just a lump of organic matter. Beings who wasted energy and emotion on unnecessary things, selfish and imperfect.

Aleph loathed wasting her knowledge on such beings.

Unless they were deeply connected to Asel. She paid no attention to mere passing protein masses. She only scanned around, looking for Asel.

"?"

Then, her head tilted slightly to the side.

'He's not here.'

Asel was nowhere to be seen. It was true that Aleph wasn't good at distinguishing people's faces, but she certainly wouldn't confuse Asel's face. Just in case, she scanned the survivors once more, but his face was still nowhere to be found.

Thump.

The moment she realized it, Aleph's artificial heart began to pound violently.

"Where is Master?"

She glared at the survivors as she asked. One of the relatively unharmed knights, who was supporting the adjutant, bit his lip as he looked at her.

Aleph's face twisted slightly at the obvious reluctance to answer.

She, who always meticulously controlled her facial muscles, couldn't do so this time. She forgot to even mimic emotions; something was wrong with her reason.

"Answer, organic matter."

Aleph suppressed her rapidly beating heart and asked again.

It might have seemed like an unfair question. The investigation team looked no different from defeated soldiers.

But no one stopped Aleph. They also had the right to know.

The team sent to investigate wasn't just made up of knights and mages. There was also the leader of a mercenary group, and the youngest, most talented mage from the Magic Tower. There were even brothers who had just started their careers as mercenaries. All those preparing to return were their comrades and family.

So, with their faces missing, no matter how cruel it might seem, they had the right to know what happened to their comrades.

"..."

The survivors knew this too. So they didn't blame or resent them. They simply kept their mouths shut and lowered their heads.

"I'll give you one more chance."

Aleph couldn't stand the silence. She created a transparent, watery vortex above her fist and walked towards the knight with a blank expression.

"If you don't answer this time, I'll grind your face to—"

"Missing."

"What did you say?"

The answer came not from the knight, but from Lute. He leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and stared at Aleph.

"He disappeared somewhere due to the monster's scheme. We don't know where he is either."

"..."

Thump, thump, thump.

Aleph's heart began to beat like a bomb. She immediately walked towards Lute and looked down at his face.

The lifeless, artificial eyes alone were intimidating. But Aleph didn't care how she appeared to others. She raised her Mana and leaned in.

"You better hope that's not true. I don't have a taste for dirty jokes."

"Asel and Ellen are missing. And everyone else is dead."

"..."

"They were attacked by parasitic creatures. They charged in as a group, some were bitten to death, and some were parasitized and transformed into monsters. We cut off their heads to prevent them from acquiring knowledge, but we couldn't cut off their spines, so there's still a chance they're alive— Cough!"

"I'm not interested in the whereabouts of other organic matter."

Poke.

Aleph pressed her foot on Lute's shoulder, revealing her murderous intent. The knights tried to stop her, but Lute stopped them instead.

He looked up at Aleph and barely managed to open his mouth.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear that kind of apology."

"I'm really sorry."

"Whereabouts."

Aleph muttered, opening a book.

"Where did Master go?"

"It seems like we're below the 20th floor of the Labyrinth."

Clack, clack.

Ellen said, striking a flint and dagger together.

"I can't pinpoint the exact location, but the environment is quite similar to what's described in the Labyrinth explorer's books. We're probably close to the lowest level."

"Where's the very bottom floor of the Labyrinth?"

"The 25th floor. That's where the demon is sealed."

Fwoosh.

The meager pile of flesh caught fire. Ellen selected only the dry pieces of red flesh clinging to the walls, cut them off, and tossed them into the fire.

"It used to be shorter. There was a time when the 20th floor was the lowest. But after a mage named Pascal Theron visited, the internal structure changed a lot."

"...Pascal Theron?"

A familiar name popped up. Asel widened his eyes and looked down at her.

"The Magic Tower Lord of the Ignis Magic Tower?"

"That's right. During his short time as a Labyrinth explorer, he came into the Labyrinth to find his wife's keepsake."

"...Huh."

The same story he had heard in the simplified Labyrinth was now coming from Ellen's mouth. Asel chuckled.

He had roughly guessed that he had actually visited the Labyrinth, but getting confirmation from someone else was a new feeling.

"He failed several times in the beginning, but later, after becoming a Great Mage, he re-entered the Labyrinth. He not only found the keepsake but also broke through to the 18th floor of the Labyrinth at the time. But it coincided with the fall of the Magic Kingdom."

"Did that cause a problem?"

"The demon sealed in the Labyrinth resonated for a brief moment with the demon that descended upon the Magic Kingdom."

...Gurgle.

The burning, dry flesh turned to ashes, emitting a terrible smell. Ellen let the smoke drift to the side and sat down next to Asel.

"So he had no choice but to go down to the lowest level of the Labyrinth. And after striking the demon, he somehow escaped with his other companions."

"How?"

"I don't know. There wasn't a detailed description of that. It just said he escaped."

"Hmm."

Asel knew that Pascal was a great mage. But he didn't know that he had struck a demon as soon as he became a Great Mage. It was a move befitting his fiery personality.

"However, he suffered damage to his hierarchy in the process of escaping and had to take a long recovery period. As you know, he reopened his eyes during the time when the race war broke out."

"So. Pascal damaged the demon of origin, resonated with the demon that descended upon the Magic Kingdom, and altered the structure of the Labyrinth?"

"Exactly."

Ellen split a piece of jerky in half and handed it to Asel as she continued.

"He deleted the rest areas that existed on the 5th and 15th floors. He cut the lowest floor down to the 25th floor. He placed cores on each floor and made it so that they could affect the surface."

"..."

"That's the current Labyrinth. Miguel Hargelein, the first head of the family, was a great man who conquered the changed Labyrinth up to the 23rd floor."

"That's amazing."

Asel said with genuine admiration.

Whether it was Pascal, who rushed to the lowest floor when the exit was blocked, or Miguel, who plunged headfirst into the Labyrinth without a manual, even though the structure had changed.

There wasn't a single person who wasn't amazing. Asel tore off a piece of jerky and raised his head towards the ceiling.

'So the simplified Labyrinth that I encountered with Pascal must have been the form before it was transformed by the demon. It's natural since the Sage is a figure from that era.'

It was a little disappointing that the simplified Labyrinth wasn't exactly the same as the current Labyrinth, but it wasn't a loss. Perhaps he would be able to clear the simplified Labyrinth more easily as he became more familiar with the actual Labyrinth.

"Shall we get going?"

After a light meal, Asel stood up from his seat and said. Ellen also picked up the axe she had placed on the floor and completely extinguished the fire.

It had been six hours since they had fallen to the lower levels of the Labyrinth. They hadn't encountered any monsters yet, but they didn't let their guard down.

The lower levels were teeming with monsters more vicious than the Noms that inhabited the 15th floor. It wouldn't be strange if their heads were cut off by a moment of carelessness.

Moreover, since he wasn't using magic, there was a high chance that he would be buried in a grave in the blink of an eye.

The senses he had acquired through many battles were still working furiously, but it was not as good as manifesting exploration magic, so there was no choice.

"For now, it's best to keep going straight this way. Rather than going back for no reason, it's better to stick to one path, at least until we reach a fork in the road."

"If necessary, we can use magic once. It's not good to be too stingy."

"I agree. Then, as before, let's avoid fighting and keep going straight—"

"Ah, survivors!"

Before Ellen could finish speaking.

A heavy voice suddenly echoed from behind her. Asel immediately assembled a Formula in his head to respond, and Ellen turned around, presenting the axe blade. The owner of the voice smiled cheerfully as he looked at the two people who were reacting quickly.

"It's not bad to be cautious. A vanguard and a mage? Which organization are you from?"

"...Who are you?"

Ellen asked, frowning. While they were talking, Asel was racking his brain to manifest a magic that would allow them to escape.

At that moment, the owner of the voice opened his mouth in a clear voice.

"It's Miguel."

"...What?"

"Miguel. No surname."

At his introduction, Asel and Ellen's faces relaxed slightly, and the man who walked out of the darkness shook the blood off his sword, his pink eyes and short blonde hair fluttering.

"Miguel, leader of the Hargelein Labyrinth Exploration Team. Which exploration team are you two from?"

# 157 - Apostle (5)

Asel and Ellen couldn't hide their bewilderment at Miguel Hargelein's sudden appearance.

Miguel was clearly a deceased person. Although there were no detailed records of his death, he was, in any case, a dead man buried in a grave. He was not someone who could be alive and standing on two feet in a place like this.

"How..."

But he had appeared here, looking perfectly fine.

"...Calm down, Ellen."

It was logically unbelievable, but Asel quickly calmed down and placed a hand on Ellen's shoulder. He felt her flinch, but he didn't reprimand her.

He had already met Pascal, a figure from the past, in the temporary Labyrinth. Thanks to that, he had known for a while that historical figures could appear in the Labyrinth.

It was knowledge only known as a rumor to the outside world, but a rumor becomes knowledge the moment it becomes truth. Asel was one of the few who had directly experienced that knowledge.

"...It's nice to meet you."

So, instead of panicking, he racked his brain to use the current situation to his advantage.

"We are a magician and a knight belonging to the kingdom's direct exploration team. We were dispatched because your return was delayed, but we were pushed down to the lower levels in the process."

"Delayed return? It's been a year and a half since we entered the Labyrinth, but there's still a long way to go before the scheduled time, isn't there?"

"It seems that the flow of time has been distorted."

Asel told a lie without changing his expression.

"Three years have already passed in the world outside the Labyrinth."

"Huh. Time flows twice as fast? That's crazy. This messes up our plans..."

Miguel scratched his blond hair and muttered as if in trouble. Meanwhile, Asel whispered in Ellen's ear.

"You know very well the rumor that you can meet figures from the past in the Labyrinth. The current situation is just witnessing that rumor being true. Nothing more, nothing less. So don't panic."

"..."

Ellen clenched her fist instead of answering.

It wasn't hard to understand. To Asel, Miguel was a complete stranger, but to her, Miguel was like an ancestor of her family. It was only natural that she would be flustered by such a being suddenly appearing before her eyes.

If it had been Ena who had appeared here, Asel would have been just as flustered as Ellen.

But in the current situation, assumptions were meaningless. He could sympathize, but now was the time to face reality. Otherwise, it wouldn't be strange if their heads were to fly off at any moment.

Asel gave Ellen time to collect herself, then stepped forward and spoke with Miguel.

"How many survivors are there currently?"

"Only 50 out of a total of 500 people remain. The rest have all fallen."

"...May they rest in peace. May God embrace them."

"May God embrace them. More importantly, how much blood did you spill coming here?"

"We were forcibly transferred in the process of coming down. So there are only two actual casualties, but if we die, it will increase to four."

"Forced transfer. Not a pleasant thing. You must have been treated with all sorts of precious things while living in the kingdom, but you must feel bad about suddenly falling into a place like this."

"Not really."

Asel reached out to Miguel and said,

"We've been through such hard times. This is nothing."

"Haha. That's a relief. At least you won't scream when you meet an enemy."

Thwack.

Miguel smiled as he grabbed Asel's hand.

"What's your rank?"

"7th Circle. I mainly handle Flame Spells."

Asel deliberately hid his affiliation and Formula.

Miguel was a person who explored the Labyrinth instead of fighting in the race war. Even so, he wouldn't be unaware of the existence of Ena, who was a famous figure at the time.

Perhaps as soon as he revealed that he was an Electromancer, he would suspect his relationship with Ena and whether he belonged to the Witch Council.

Then the lie that he had introduced himself as belonging to the kingdom would be exposed. It was right to avoid anything that could be used against him.

"Flame Spell. It's a magic with considerable power. There are those who handle Flame Spells in our exploration team as well. Although their rank is 6th Circle, lower than yours."

"That alone is a great thing."

"Who's arguing? What's your name?"

"Asel."

"Asel. It has a nice ring to it. The reason you're not introducing your last name is because of the reason I'm guessing, right?"

"Probably."

"I suddenly feel a sense of kinship."

Miguel chuckled and let go of Asel's hand. At that moment, Ellen, who had been standing behind Asel, seemed to have finally come to her senses and approached the two of them.

"Ellen... I'm Ellen. I don't have a last name... My level is Upper Expert. The weapon I use is a battle axe."

"Upper Expert. Not bad combat power. More than that, I didn't know the kingdom's exploration team would recruit so many commoners."

"The Labyrinth is a place where people die if you pick and choose, isn't it?"

Asel took Miguel's words instead of Ellen.

"So, from their point of view, commoners are more suitable than nobles."

"I guess so."

Miguel didn't particularly doubt Asel's words and put his sword back into its scabbard. Then, he stared intently at Ellen and made a humming sound.

"Hmm... Have we perhaps met somewhere before?"

"...No. You must be mistaken."

Ellen answered, trying to maintain a blank expression as much as possible. Miguel shrugged his shoulders without questioning her answer any further.

"Is that so? My apologies."

The conversation between the two people who shared the same bloodline but transcended the flow of time ended like that.

Miguel said that he would guide them to the base and began to walk ahead through the maze-like Labyrinth.

"The lower levels of the Labyrinth have the characteristic of changing structure in real time. This is possible because the floor, walls, and ceiling are all living flesh."

Asel and Ellen already knew that much information. But the two didn't bother to open their mouths and listened to what Miguel had to say.

Miguel was the first person to break through the Labyrinth, which had changed its structure to the 25th floor, down to the 23rd floor. Some of the information he currently possessed was known to the outside world, but from Miguel's point of view, he was the original transmitter.

"The monsters here also have tricky habits. They don't die unless you dissect their brains. They keep moving and eventually lay eggs in people's bodies and die. The person who becomes a breeding sac then gives birth to dozens of monsters and dies."

"..."

"Other information... Ah, yes. There is a seemingly clear spring here. But the water is a corrosive liquid with an incubation period, and the moment it enters a person's body, it melts their organs and lower body in a few hours. Never touch or drink it."

Asel questioned inwardly as he looked at Miguel listing the information he had obtained.

'He seems like someone who likes to share the information he has acquired. Why didn't he leave any records about the Labyrinth beyond the 20th floor?'

The Labyrinth exploration record book passed down in the Hargelein family had a period at the end, with information about the 20th floor as the last. What was the reason why Miguel, who had succeeded in coming down to the lower levels, did not record information about it?

'Did he lose some of his memories? Or was there a reason why he couldn't?'

He couldn't be sure either way. But the only important thing was that something had happened to him in the Labyrinth.

Perhaps he could find out the truth on this journey.

However, was there any reason to do so?

Asel did not forget his purpose.

He had entered the Labyrinth to understand and acquire its habits and environment, and then to break through the temporary Labyrinth to the end. Finding out the secrets of the Hargelein family was naturally relegated to a lower priority.

He had already found out as much as he needed to know about the Labyrinth. The core on the 15th floor had been dealt with, although not by the exploration team, so it was the same as achieving his goal.

All that was left was to escape this place, head to the carved cliff, and take the elixir.

He didn't have much time. Asel was planning to head straight to the Valdemia Principality after leaving this place. A busy schedule was essential to spend his vacation meaningfully.

"We've arrived."

While he was thinking, the three people joined the survivors of the exploration team. Those who were sitting with flesh seeping blood on their backs waved their hands when they saw Miguel returning.

"Any abnormalities during the reconnaissance?"

"No. The structure doesn't seem to have changed yet."

"That's not bad news. But what are those two lumps you brought with you?"

A magician with bright red hair shouted sharply. Miguel brought the two forward and introduced them.

The magician's face slightly contorted after hearing his explanation.

"Belonging to the kingdom's exploration team? I've never heard of such a thing."

"It was created in secret. As you know, the outside world is currently full of blood due to the race war. In such a situation, the moment the country announces its position on managing the Labyrinth, it will be seen as an easy target for other races. To avoid that, we did not announce a public position."

"You're good at talking?"

The magician spat out in an admiring voice. She grabbed her staff and strode towards Asel.

Thud.

Ellen stopped her stride. She slammed the floor with the axe she was holding, preventing her from approaching any further.

"What's this?"

"Don't come any closer. I won't back down unless you promise not to show any clear hostility."

Had she gathered her mind? Ellen said that with a cold expression and voice, without showing any signs of panic. The magician wiggled her staff with a slightly aggrieved tone.

"No, I don't intend to antagonize you either? But I have to check your skills, so I just went closer to ask you to show me some magic. Can you not overinterpret?"

"There is no Mana in the lower levels of the Labyrinth, so it is difficult to recover if you consume magic. A demonstration is unnecessary."

"It's okay, kid. I have potions overflowing."

The magician took out a glass bottle filled with blue liquid from her chest and said.

"I'm a magician who can do instant Alchemy. I brought enough potions for several years when I came to the Labyrinth. There are many magicians who died in the middle, so there are plenty of spares. There's nothing to worry about if you use magic for a moment."

"...If that's the case."

Ellen, after hearing the explanation, turned to Asel and asked for his opinion. Asel chuckled and stepped forward instead of Ellen.

"I will demonstrate. Give me the potion in advance."

"Good, you have a fiery personality as you handle Flame Spells? In that case, I'll decide your position within our exploration team through this demonstration. For your information, I'm the strongest magician right now. Flame Sorcerer Rachel."

"I'm Asel."

"Then start."

Asel nodded and manipulated Mana.

The time it took for her face, which seemed to be testing him, to be filled with astonishment and then change back to politeness was only 5 minutes.

"Are you perhaps from the Flame Emperor? You seem to have built your own unique magic system, would you perhaps give me even a little bit of guidance..."

"You're pathetic, Rachel. Did you sell your usual nagging attitude to a monster?"

"Shut up, Miguel! You deliberately hid that he was a 7th Circle Sorcerer, didn't you?! To make me look bad!"

"Can you not overinterpret?"

"Don't copy what I said!"

Rachel slapped Miguel on the back, then bowed politely to Asel again.

"Please give me guidance, a 6th Circle like me... Master..."

Asel smiled bitterly at the clearly changed attitude.

# 158 - Apostle (6)

“This part is a bit difficult... What does it mean to give Spiral Force to the flow of Mana? Huh? If I can't do this, my firepower will drop significantly? No, how do I do it? Huh? A feeling?”

“You're quite skilled in Water Flow Magic. Did you learn the Water Flow Spell before entering the Ignis Magic Tower?”

“Human. How do you do this? I've organized the Spirit Spell in my own way, but there's one thing that's bothering me. ...What? You say this is all nonsense? Nonsense! Let's settle this with magic!”

Thanks to a series of demonstrations, Asel quickly became a well-known figure among the mages in the expedition team.

Though there weren't many mages, Asel's figure was obscured by the crowd surrounding him. Ellen, with a wry smile, hugged her knees and lowered her head.

“You don't look very energetic.”

At that moment, Miguel approached her. He held a bottle full of apple wine and stood beside Ellen, gazing at the group of mages. Ellen immediately straightened up and spoke as soon as her ancestor appeared.

“...It's nothing serious. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“That's when you need a drink the most.”

With a swift motion, Miguel offered the drink he was holding to Ellen.

“Care for a glass?”

“...Drinking is prohibited in the Labyrinth. If you're not careful, you could lose your head right there.”

“What nonsense. I'm leading this expedition; who would dare to take my head? Is a god going to come down? A blasphemer! Yelling like this?”

“......”

“Don't worry and drink. Anyway, no monsters are going to show up around here.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“This is a safe zone discovered over the past six months. Although the safe layer itself has disappeared since Pascal visited, such safe zones still exist.”

“......”

“It’s a place found at the cost of dozens of hearts. So don't doubt it.”

“...If you put it that way.”

Ellen accepted the bottle with a reluctant but grateful expression and took a small sip of the apple wine. The sweet and bitter taste lingered lightly in her mouth.

“Ugh...”

Ellen stuck out her tongue and scrunched her face. She wasn't used to drinking, as she had always been weak with alcohol, and the sudden strong drink felt like it was burning her throat.

“It seems you can't handle your drink as you look. Are you perhaps not yet an adult?”

“...No, I became an adult this year.”

“I express my regrets about your growth. Perhaps your parents are small?”

“...My father is tall, and my mother is short.”

“You must have taken after your mother. Well, there's a certain charm in being small for a woman.”

As Miguel said this, he took the bottle of alcohol that Ellen had offered.

“What is your relationship with that mage?”

“We're just simple friends.”

Ellen replied immediately. She turned her head slightly, her cheeks flushed, and continued speaking.

“Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Hmmm...”

Miguel chuckled, raising his eyebrows as he sat down next to Ellen and whispered to her.

“Then how about this? If a chance arises for you to be with him... how would you act then?”

“W-What?”

“If you're just friends, you could easily reject his feelings, right? After all, you have no feelings for him. You just feel comfortable being together. Nothing more than that.”

“......”

“After rejecting his feelings, if someone else helps him in his despair, perhaps it won't be you who ends up with him, but that person. Then, realizing your own feelings, you might regret your past choices and end up alone for the rest of your life—”

“Ahhh!”

Ellen suddenly interrupted Miguel with a loud exclamation. The unexpected noise made Asel peek out from among the mages.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Oh, it's nothing. I just dozed off for a moment and had a nightmare.”

“Really? If you're tired, you should rest first. From what I've heard, it seems like the real search for an escape route will start tomorrow.”

“Ah, I understand. You should take it easy and rest too.”

“I will.”

Asel smiled and then dove back into the crowd of mages. Miguel took a sip of his drink and spoke up.

“Quite a gentle personality for a mage. I don't know how it will be in battle, but at least from what I see now.”

“...She is indeed kind. Even in battle, she hasn’t been consumed by emotions or lost her reason.”

“Then that's a relief. Anyway, so...”

Miguel glanced at Ellen with a smirk.

“Have your complicated thoughts eased a bit?”

“......”

“Silence has long been known as a sign of positivity. I’ll take it that way.”

He casually finished the last of his drink and stood up. Ellen sighed deeply, feeling the image of her ‘heroic ancestor’ she had cherished in her heart crack.

Perhaps that was why. Suddenly, without passing through her mind, she blurted out a thought that had just come to her.

“Do you have no regrets about coming to the Labyrinth to avoid the war?”

“Hmm. That's a question I haven't heard before.”

“Ah.”

As soon as she spoke, she regretted it. It sounded like she was blaming someone for hiding in the Labyrinth to escape the war. She had no such intention, but it was a question that could easily twist her intent depending on the listener. Apologizing was the natural thing to do.

“I’m sorry—”

“I have no regrets.”

But Miguel's answer came quicker than Ellen's apology. He looked down at her with a slightly flushed face from the drink and continued.

“The world is in turmoil from war. All races are spilling blood to claim each other's lands. Even humans aren't united among themselves. They fight as kingdoms, stabbing spears into the hearts of all races.”

“......”

“There are some simple-minded superhumans like that woman Ena, who move according to their hearts and seek mere elevation of their status. War is a place where heroes are born as much as it is filled with flowing corpses. There’s no better place for advancement. For a common mercenary like me to rise to a high position, there’s no better place.”

Ellen remained silent, keeping her mouth shut. Regardless, Miguel continued to glance at the debating mages while resting his hand on the sword at his waist.

“But what does it mean to rise through a war stained with desire? Is there glory in that war? Is there a divine will? Did anyone’s merit come to be?”

“......”

“There’s none of that. Everything is just simple greed. They don’t care how lovely the humans’ land is, how beautiful the elves’ land is, how technical the vampires’ city is, how vibrant the orcs’ city is, or how warm the dwarves’ underground city is. They just want to obtain that land, that blood, those slaves. There’s no meaning in such a war.”

“Then...”

“Entering the Labyrinth is because I want to convey something to them.”

Click.

He pulled out a small pendant from his pocket and continued speaking.

“There have been great evils opposing the gods since the day I was born. The Labyrinth is the most representative place, and it has been going through a rampage for several years now. If left alone, a Monster Wave that could turn the entire continent upside down will occur.”

“......”

“That must be stopped. It’s possible that the world could perish at our hands. We must stop that as well, but if that day comes, I can accept it. But not to the demons.”

“......”

“I cannot hand over this land to those bastards. No matter what happens.”

Ellen didn’t know what image was drawn on the pendant. But the silhouette that briefly flashed looked like a family photo of someone.

“I entered the Labyrinth for that reason. A task more valuable than war. A mindset that every knight raised in this land must have. To prevent the destruction caused by the Labyrinth.”

“......”

“That’s the biggest reason for heading here.”

“...I see.”

“Well, it might seem foolish to others. But I don’t care if they call me a coward hiding from the war. I’m just following my beliefs.”

“Do the others moving with you share similar beliefs?”

“Indeed.”

Miguel smiled and looked at his companions.

“They are all precious friends.”

The expedition team decided to aim for finding an escape route instead of going further down.

They would set off tomorrow morning. After taking a break, they decided to move. Asel nodded, not wanting to go against Miguel's wishes.

In his heart, he wanted to find the escape route immediately, but that was impossible. Wandering the Labyrinth alone as a mage was akin to a suicide mission. Even so, Asel was not twisted enough to leave them behind.

On that bright morning in the lower levels, they had brought enough supplies for several years, so breakfast was much more luxurious than Lute's expedition team. Though it was just a few pieces of bread and some drinks, they were grateful for it.

After finishing their meal, they lined up and began to search for the escape route in earnest.

The Labyrinth had the characteristic of having larger escape routes as they descended to lower levels. No matter how much the structure of the Labyrinth changed, that did not change.

“...The structure is different again from yesterday.”

The problem was that the structure of the lower levels of the Labyrinth continuously changed. The living walls and floors still writhed, creating the illusion that they had entered the belly of a giant creature.

“......”

Was it really just an illusion?

It had been quite some time since the demon of the beginning was sealed, yet no one knew the true identity of the Labyrinth. Some said it was a maze that prevented the unsealing of the demon, while others claimed it was a place created by the demon to absorb power.

What the truth was remained a matter of debate, but everyone acknowledged that this place was filled with evil.

“Watch your step.”

Miguel said, scraping the flesh-ridden ground with his sword. A surge of blood splashed slightly onto his shoes.

“Every now and then, it splits open and devours people—”

“Ah.”

As Miguel spoke, the ground beneath one of the mercenaries carrying a backpack split open, and the mercenary's lower half sank into the ground.

“Shit.”

Crack!

A sound like something being chewed echoed, and blood gushed from the mercenary's mouth. He trembled as he unbuckled his bag, a bitter smile on his face.

“I guess this is where I end, Captain. Cough, please escape safely...”

With those words, the light faded from the mercenary's eyes. Though his voice was too small for Miguel, who was walking at the front, to hear, Miguel clenched his fist and quickened his pace.

“Thank you for being with us, Louis.”

No answer came. Only the sound of another mercenary packing up echoed quietly.

“Another one today.”

Flickering.

A Flame Sorcerer burned the corpse of the mercenary, speaking with a gloomy expression.

“May you have the blessing of magic in your next life. May your soul protect our safety.”

After the mage's cremation was complete, the expedition team moved forward without any lingering feelings.

Asel and Ellen felt a pang of sorrow at their calm yet sad demeanor.

“Watch your step.”

Miguel continued with what he hadn’t finished saying.

“If you don’t react immediately when it opens, you will definitely die. Don’t think about saving your Aura or Mana; just get as far away as you can from the mouth.”

As soon as he finished speaking, this time, the young mage's lower half opened up, swallowing her upper body whole. She hadn’t reacted quickly enough due to focusing on Miguel's words and sensed her death, smiling brightly.

“Please remember that a mage named Miyu existed!”

Crack!

The mouth closed.

# 159 - Apostle (7)

Exploration Journal.

Author: Edeline Stoyanova

Day 1.

Five hundred people gathered to head into the Labyrinth. It was an excessively large number, but currently, monsters were surging from the first floor of the Labyrinth. The more people we had, the better. They could serve as meat shields.

Do you think I’m cold-hearted? But if you, the one reading this, have ever visited the Labyrinth even once, you would undoubtedly have developed a mindset similar to mine. I send infinite praise to you, who can still feel compassion for others.

Day 7.

It hasn’t been long since we entered the Labyrinth, yet the number of people has dropped from 500 to 450. Damn lich. The magic wielded by that creature has stripped the skin off not only the priests but also the wizards, leading to their deaths. Seeing the collapsing corpses made my heart feel like it was breaking.

However, I survived, and I will continue to survive. It is the monsters’ waists that must break, not my heart.

Today, we descended to the 10th floor. The pace was quite smooth.

Day 21.

Two weeks have passed since we entered the 10th floor, but we are still stuck here. The number of monsters is absurdly high. I have killed many with my flame magic, yet death still crawls at our backs.

When will we be able to go down further?

Today’s casualties totaled 30.

Day 50.

We have entered the 11th floor. Although we were stuck on the 10th floor for a long time, we managed to descend.

The 11th floor had an atmosphere reminiscent of a starry sea submerged beneath a lake. The beautiful starlight seemed to wish for our safety and well-being. I made a wish in my heart while gazing at the stars.

May I survive today as well.

Today’s casualties totaled 5. Not too many deaths.

Day 51.

The starlight from the lake and ceiling was a seductive light! When approached, a monster that seemed to have crawled out from the deep sea opened its mouth wide and devoured only the brains of its victims, spitting their corpses onto the floor!

Today’s casualties totaled 51.

Those who washed themselves in the lake no longer had brains in their heads.

Day 80.

We have entered the 12th floor. The current number of remaining expedition members is about 250. Or is it? I’m not sure anymore. I’m tired of counting heads.

Miguel was still active, but I could sense an indelible sadness and anger in his eyes.

Today’s casualties were 20.

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Day 200.

It feels like it’s been a long time since I last wrote in this journal. Is that really the case? It probably is. I’ve been too busy to spare time for writing.

To get to the point, we managed to enter the 17th floor of the Labyrinth.

There were many sacrifices along the way, but what does that matter? The important thing is that we are actively tackling the Labyrinth in real-time, and the number of monsters ascending to the surface has noticeably decreased (though I can’t be sure. Communication with the surface was cut off long ago).

We named the most powerful monster on each floor “Core.” Naming has a very strong sorcerous effect, so I didn’t want to give a name to the monster if possible, but it was a word we chose. I thought it had a nice ring to it.

Currently, we have destroyed the Core on the 17th floor. It was a grotesque creature in the form of a giant snake, with human arms and legs protruding from its belly. It took 100 members of the expedition to kill this thing. Watching people disintegrate in real-time was quite a horrific experience.

The number of people, which had been close to 500 at the start, had now dwindled to around 100.

If there is a next life, I deeply wish for them to be blessed with magic.

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Day 365.

It has been exactly one year since we entered the Labyrinth. We are currently breaking through the 20th floor.

I won’t write much. The important thing is that I survived, and the exact number of remaining members is 74. Counting has become relatively easier now (which is not a good sign).

From tomorrow, we plan to continue our exploration of the lower levels. Of course, that is if we destroy the Core tomorrow.

Can we do it? We should be able to. If we can’t, we’ll die anyway.

Suddenly, I found myself missing my mother. She regained her health with the elixir I gave her, but she must still feel awkward walking. I need to hurry back and help her.

I can only hope that my younger sibling can take on both my role and that of my brother.

Day 380.

We destroyed the Core on the 20th floor. The casualties were 10. A great victory.

I lost one kidney.

This is not a big deal.

(It hurts.)

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Day 450.

We have entered the 22nd floor. At the same time, 12 people died instantly. The floor opened up and swallowed their bodies. I nearly died myself, but my brother pushed me aside and sacrificed himself instead. His head rolled over and fell at my feet.

I cremated the victims myself (though all that remained were a few pieces of corpses).

Damn.

Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn.

Miguel, is this really the right thing? Exploring the lower levels is what everyone desires, and I agree with it, but is this truly for the sake of the world? Are we not, in fact, committing a grand act of collective suicide?

Please tell me the answer.

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Day 560.

A wizard and a knight claiming to be from the kingdom’s expedition team appeared. Both looked quite handsome, but they were commoners just like Miguel. How could that be possible? The kingdom is supposed to have severe class discrimination, right?

That question was soon resolved. Their abilities were extraordinarily high. That day, I realized that a wizard named MMM was the owner of the seat of the flame master that Lord Pascal had left for someone. The formula system of magic that Lord Pascal had been researching was already complete for him.

So I asked for his teachings, and he readily agreed.

But I don’t really understand what he’s saying. The explanations are detailed, but actually accomplishing it is nearly impossible.

He said to capture the Mana circulating around and convert it into Mana power, then reassemble, interpret, and reverse-calculate the formula, and what else? Anyway, after finishing all that in one second, I was to add Spiral Force. Then a fireball would be created, he said.

What kind of high-level magic is a fireball? How can anyone do all that? Are you really a flame sorcerer like me?

Still, it’s true that his appearance has raised the morale within the expedition.

And Miguel finally declared the escape from the Labyrinth!

I can finally go see my mother.

I feel happy. Let’s survive until the moment we escape! Let’s not let my brother’s sacrifice be in vain!

I can do it, Edeline!

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Escape Search Day 1.

Total number of people: 54. Casualties: 9. Cause of death: tentacles that sprang from moving walls pierced their bodies. Number of people reduced to 45.

Escape search failed.

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Escape Search Day 2.

Total number of people: 45. Casualties: 10. Cause of death: heads exploded after being lured by a monster that emitted a strange sound. It was dealt with through high-level magic, but the casualties could not return. Number of people reduced to 35.

Escape search failed.

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Escape Search Day 3.

Total number of people: 35. Casualties: 12. Cause of death for 5: crushed by a monster that emitted Mana pressure. Cause of death for the remaining 7: blood-red worms crawled out from the blood that flowed from the crushed corpses and devoured flesh and organs in one second. Number of people reduced to 23. A knight named ?? lost one eye.

Escape search failed.

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Escape Search Day 4.

The kidney that had disappeared suddenly regenerated. What happened?

Number of people reduced to 11.

Escape search failed.

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Escape Search Day 5.

Escape search failed.

And I realized that my body was transforming into that of a monster.

Ah, it seems I have reached my limit. After writing this journal, I will die at Miguel’s hands. How tragic it is to die at the hands of the man I love. But if I’m going to die anyway, I would prefer to be in Miguel’s embrace rather than a monster’s.

He will probably kill me and engrave my existence in his heart. Then I will exist forever in his memories.

Will he remember me? I hope so. If you ever read this journal, just know that I loved you terribly.

I wanted to kiss you, hold your hand, have a wedding, and have children. I don’t care that you’re a commoner. It wouldn’t have been so bad to abandon my family and run away with you. But the situation has turned out this way. I’m sorry. And I love you. Please tell my mother that I’m sorry and that I love her.

Ah, God. Please forgive me for only seeking your name at times like this. And embrace me.

If there is a next life, I sincerely hope you grant happiness to me and him.

Today’s casualty: 1.

The life of the happiest woman, who dies at the hands of her beloved, comes to an end here.

Then, farewell.

Rustle.

The severed head rolls on the floor. Miguel bows his head deeply, sheathing his bloodless sword, and carefully picks up her head.

“...Huh.”

Edeline Stoyanova. The eldest daughter of the Stoyanova family and a great sorceress. Although her life’s candle flickered out at the 6th tier, had she survived, she might have risen to the position of a grand sorcerer based on her experiences in the Labyrinth.

Miguel trembled as he held her head close.

Her face, which was becoming grotesque in real-time, was hard to describe as human, even in the best of terms. Red mold bloomed where the skin had been stripped away, and the hundreds of pupils in her forehead oozed pus and blood.

But Miguel did not care. He simply embraced the head of the dead girl with a smile, letting his unacknowledged feelings drift into the void.

There was no sound. No mourning. There were already too many who had been sent away.

The weight of life pressing down on his shoulders and back felt heavy enough to break his spine at any moment. But Miguel did not bend his back. He simply endured it all calmly.

“...Let’s go.”

In a heavily subdued voice, he spoke.

There was no response. Asel closed her eyes tightly, gripping the Mana recovery potions that Edeline had given her just before she died.

Ellen tightened the blood-soaked bandages and wiped her mouth with her hand. The blood that had not been absorbed flowed out from between her split eyelids, trickling down her cheeks and dropping onto her chin.

Current number of remaining members: 10.

They were still trapped inside the Labyrinth.

Wiheim’s morning was peaceful once again today. Though the season had passed summer, the weather was cool, and the sunlight was warm.

A cluster of flowers swayed in the breeze, painting the sky beautifully, and chirping birds brought vitality to the world.

“Hmm.”

Norium smiled as he sipped a cup of coffee, gazing at the entire scene.

Recently, devil worshipers have been rampant, but the city of wizards here remained peaceful.

It was perhaps only natural, as the 8th tier grand sorcerers appeared on the streets, making it clear that if one didn’t want to be trapped alive in a laboratory, they should keep a low profile.

Of course, that didn’t mean he was complacent. The city’s walls were still fiercely operational, and there were no gaps. He checked them personally every day, so there was no room for doubt.

It was a peaceful day in many ways. He even thought that he wished such days would continue.

“......”

The only problem was that recently Asel had suddenly run away to the Labyrinth, which had left Ena in a furious state for several days. Norium had never seen Ena so angry.

“I never knew you could curse so well, senior.”

Everyone knows, but Ena is of royal descent. For her to use vulgar language so casually meant she was truly furious. There was no need to explain further, as thunder had been falling from the sky for the past few days.

Surely her tier had dropped, yet the lightning still served her as its master, responding to her emotions.

Boom!

Even now, it was the same. Norium sighed deeply and set his coffee down on the table.

“......Hurry back, Asel. At this rate, your master will die of a fit.”

It was at that moment he muttered to himself. Suddenly, his bedroom door burst open with a loud bang.

“L-Leader! It’s a disaster!”

The intruder was a wizard from the alliance. Norium turned his head to him, who had failed to observe proper etiquette, and politely asked, “What’s going on, Kyle?”

Kyle was one of the wizards known for his exceptional manners. If he appeared like this, it surely wasn’t for a trivial matter. Norium took a sip of his coffee, his expression turning serious.

“Senior Gaebyeok!”

Kyle shouted at him.

“Senior Gaebyeok headed to the Labyrinth alone last night!”

“...Ah.”

Drip.

Coffee spilled from his mouth.